

THE BIG HOUSE



Alone among the younger Princes,
Victoria inherits the traditions
of THE BIG HOUSE, emblem of a proud past
and defends them against her greedy and pleasure loving generation

MILDRED WASSON

THE BIG HOUSE

By Mildred Wasson

ON Grandfather Price's death, the Big House, symbol of the wealth and pride of a past generation, is left, not to his sons but to his granddaughter, the proud and lovely Victoria in whose veins there seems to stir some of the daring spirit of her pioneer forbears.

How Victoria accepts the responsibility of leadership of the truculent clan of the Prices, how she is cheated out of the Big House, how she is involved in an engagement with one man but comes to love another—all this is told in a book of extraordinary individuality and unflagging interest.

'The Big House' is more than a fine, stirring novel; it is an epic of American family life in which is faithfully mirrored the profound changes of the last half-century.

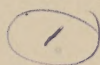
The Big House

MILDRED WASSON

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN CO.




**TRADE
REFERENCE
LIBRARY**



**Please Return To:
2 Park Street, Boston, Mass., U.S.A.**

THE BIG HOUSE



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024 with funding from
Boston Public Library

<https://archive.org/details/bighouse00wass>

THE BIG HOUSE

BY
MILDRED WASSON



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge

COPYRIGHT, 1926, BY MILDRED WASSON

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

SECOND IMPRESSION, OCTOBER, 1926

The Riverside Press

CAMBRIDGE . MASSACHUSETTS

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

TO
K. H. A.

THE BIG HOUSE



CHAPTER I

ONE day when Victoria was ten years old, Grandpa Price's sister Sarah came over from the Big House, breathless from unwonted exertion.

'Why didn't you send Hannah?' demanded Aunt Harriet, as the old lady panted and fanned on the hall bench.

'Hannah!' she sputtered, with what seemed to be her last wheeze; 'much good that old fool is! She's rocking and moaning for fear James is going to die.'

'Well, is he?' asked Harriet with her usual calm, but her bright black eyes kindled with excitement.

'Pshaw! Just one of his attacks. I told him he would die in the next one if not in this, if he doesn't stop eating so much. He will have meat three times a day. Where's Victoria? He wants her.'

Harriet's sharp eyes met Aunt Sarah's clouded blue ones, and they exchanged an unspoken thought. 'I'll call her,' she said passively. 'She's out in the yard — or should be.'

Victoria stood by her grandfather's bed, twisting her soiled gingham dress with very black little fingers. They were covered with pitch, and there

were no evergreens in Uncle Matthew's yard. She supposed that this unusual summons had to do with that fact. So she put an inky-tipped finger in her mouth, not in shyness, but to see how much she could lick off before Aunt Sarah got there.

'What have you been doing, Vixen?' Grandpa asked, his eyes on the telltale fingers.

'Climbing.'

'In your own apple tree?'

'No, sir. I can do that easy. This is sort of a Christmas tree over on Pine Street. You have to shinny a long way before there are any branches at all. I was way up when Aunt Harriet called me. I hope your belly-ache is better.'

The high, soft mound which raised the tumbled spread midway between Grandpa's head and feet now began to shake heartily, and Grandpa's forehead got very red and full of tight veins.

'It is, thank you. Sit down.'

'On the bed?' whispered Victoria, with a gesture to indicate the deplorable state of her frock, and another more eloquent pantomime thrown in the indefinite direction of Aunt Sarah.

'Yes, on the bed. Hop up. Now I've got something to say to you. I am not going to die to-day.' Victoria regarded him with bright interest. 'But your Aunt Sarah tells me that some day I shall pop off in one of these — ah — belly-aches, as you so daintily put it. And maybe she's right. I'm an old man, Vixen, and things which used to seem important to me, don't any more. Do you understand?'

'Oh, yes,' answered Victoria easily. 'F'rinstance, not climbing any nice, straight, sticky trees, but being allowed to climb stupid old bushes in your own yard. Things like that.'

'Yes, things like that, and other things too, which you don't understand. Well, I want to tell you something. It's nobody's business but yours and mine. Your mother was my little baby, born after the others had grown up. She was a sweet little girl, but a naughty one like you. She liked to climb trees that were outside her own yard. I used to think it mattered. Now I know that it don't. Once she asked a favor of your grandmother and me, and we refused. I am sorry. I want you to forgive me for her, Vixen. Do you?'

'Yes,' said Victoria soberly, not in the least understanding.

'We thought that because we were strong we could afford to be cruel. Do you know what I mean, baby? If you do, tell me in your own words. If you don't, say so. I can't stand smirking youngsters who try to fool folks with their glib looks. Tell me just what I meant.'

'You meant,' began Victoria — drawling a little and trying not to look glib — 'you meant that if you were a dog, you might say, and you caught a rabbit, you used to think you ought to kill it because you had the size, but now you know it would be a dirty trick. I c'n remember when I used to *stretch* toads! Gee, I used to be an awful child. Why, one day Aunt Har—'

'Yes, never mind. I doubt if the delicate state of my health would permit me to hear about it.

What I wanted to know was, do you listen with your mind? You've got a good little head, Vixen, an honest little head.'

'Yes,' agreed Victoria blandly.

Grandpa lay still for a while, making queer noises in his throat. Victoria watched him curiously, wondering if, after all, he was going to die this attack. After a few minutes he spoke.

'Your mother — Emily — wanted you to have her room for your own. She left you there, and we — we — that is your grandmother — no, damn it — the two of us did it. We wouldn't let you stay in your mother's room. We stuck you out back in the servants' quarters, and then we shipped you over to the other house. And your mother wanted her baby to have her pretty room. I can't get over it, Vixen — I —'

'Grandpa, don't!' He was crying. Victoria threw both arms around his hot swollen neck and dabbed his weakly streaming eyes with a small cotton handkerchief, gummed with pitch.

'There, there,' she patted and cooed in the liquid tones reserved for her dolls only. 'Don't cry, Grandpa. You're not going to die this attack. Blow your nose. You'll feel lots better. I can't think when my nose is all sniffley.'

'Do you love me, Vixen?' he asked, fiercely hugging her tough little body to him.

'Yes, I do,' she whispered. 'Don't cry, dear. I love you a whole lot — the very next best to Hannah!'

Then Victoria thought Grandpa must have lost his mind, for he laughed till he cried, and

begged for the pitchy handkerchief, and then he coughed till Victoria had to get him a drink of water, which brought Aunt Sarah flying to the door; whereupon he swore dreadfully and told Aunt Sarah to get out and stay out. Then he muttered to himself, 'By God, I'll do it!' over and over again. But Victoria was used to swearing. Oscar, Uncle Matthew's hired man, swore lots worse than that. And then he reached her to him, and she climbed back on the bed.

'Do you love your Aunt Sarah, too?' he asked, with a malicious gleam in his eyes, which Victoria understood. She had smuggled many a peppermint from the dinner-table for Grandpa, so he could escape Aunt Sarah's remarks about his fat stomach and his blood pressure. And she often got him little drinks from a tall-necked bottle in the billiard-room closet, so the candy would taste better afterward. Oh, she and Grandpa understood each other. So she answered that superfluous question with a broad wink, which seemed to throw him into better humor.

'How about Uncle Matthew? On, Vixen and Blitzen! Out with it! You're talking to a dying man!'

'Like ducks, I am,' parried Victoria, hitching up closer, as Grandpa rolled over and nearly spilled her off.

'Come on. Truth or consequences?'

'Consequences,' she chose with teasing perversity.

'No, truth!' roared Grandpa. 'Do you or do you not love your Uncle Matthew?'

Victoria pondered. There was an ethical point involved. Finally she answered, 'When you live with a person, and you are that person's niece, and he is trying to be a father to you, you've got to love him. It's the least you can do, isn't it?'

'Oh, Emily, my little Emily,' moaned Grandpa, and he swallowed about a dozen times. 'Come on, now, Truth! Do you love your Aunt Harriet?'

'No, I don't have to. She's a Lawrence.'

And Grandpa swore with mighty mirth. 'So this pious talk about loving some one who is trying to be a parent to you was all bosh, was it? Oh, Vixen, are you like all the rest?'

'No, Grandpa, honest. She's not trying to be my mother. She is trying very hard, she says, to make me not my mother. I don't like her.'

'And you don't like the Lawrences?'

'I'm mad with Hastings.'

'Oh, I see. Well, how about Cousin Ernest? What do you think of him?'

'I'll tell you just what I think of him, Grandpa. I think he's a sissy, but he can't help it. He's quite nice, even though we do fight a lot.'

'How do you mean, he's a sissy?'

'Oh, scared to death to do anything the family doesn't want us to. F'rinstance, Sunday dinners, when you've gone up for your nap, and the others are all smoking cigars and talking, and we are supposed to play quiet out in the nursery, he never wants to go exploring, or play pirates and swipe perfumery out of Aunt Sarah's gold bottles, or any of the things you can play on Sunday. He says his mother told him that if he waked you up,

or o-fended Uncle Matthew, he'd never get any money when he grew up. He's so careful!'

'And how about you? Don't you care if you wake your poor old grandpa?'

'In the first place,' said Victoria with a very wicked smile, 'you always snore so loud you couldn't hear us, and, anyway, I don't give a damn for anybody!'

Grandpa pinched her slender nose with his great thumb and forefinger, and gently pushed her off the bed. 'Run along out now. Some day you can tell 'em all to go to hell.'

Victoria stared for a second, then dimpled merrily. She loved Grandpa's jokes.

He listened till the last light thud of Victoria's galloping descent was drowned in the thick carpets, then closed his eyes wearily and wooed the phantom shapes of the past.

CHAPTER II

DREAM back eighty years, and you see Hamlin as one of the greatest lumber ports in the world. But it was her complacent resting upon a vanished glory which sent the sons of her stalwart youth back into the past to seek solace for her fall

When the pressed-tin emporiums of 'Gopher Prairie' mirrored a new dawn in their blistering façades, the cool brick walls of Hamlin, Maine, were being dyed a dignified sunset purple.

Once the square sterns of home-built vessels spelled the name of Hamlin to the seven seas. Now an enterprising cord tire manufacturer introduces approaching motorists to the town from which the first salmon of the season is always sent to the White House.

In the old days there were stately homes along the water-front, not builded by the prowess of amateur fishermen, but as simple monuments to the thrift and diligence of Hamlin's pioneers. At the foot of terraced lawns lay their masters' ships at anchor, impatiently waiting their turn to add another broad deck to the bridge of loading hulls which already reached from Government Street to the Head. Then they would sink their water-lines under a towering load of freshly cut lumber and join the brave parade down-river.

But as primal forests fell away before the scourging march of lumbermen, the masts rotted

out of the fleet, and the hulls crawled up on the banks to die. Then the big square houses drew their shutters and the owners edged away from the Stream.

The Stream, whose quickening waters had nourished the life of Hamlin from turgid spring to still-bound winter, now loosed its hold upon the people and resigned its trust to the Hill.

Although the two banks of the river were equally entitled to be called hills, and although both became populated by Hamlin citizens in good standing, the eastern slope was known as the Hill while across the Stream lay 'the other side.'

Perhaps the Hill derived its superior appellation from the fact that old Jim Price, sire of Victoria's grandfather, chose that side when he abandoned his broad, square farmhouse on the river-bank and gave the signal for Hamlin to move back.

He had foreseen this inevitable migration, and thoughtfully acquired a choice tract of pasture while the Hill was still listed at pasture-land valuation. The Prices had been among the first to force the frontier into the very shadow of the northern wilderness, and where Prices led, the rest of Hamlin settlement had been wont to follow.

Something closely resembling a land boom came upon the heels of the early homesteaders on the Hill. Shrewd lumbermen and shipbuilders seemed to read a mysterious future development in a present prosperity, founded upon a passing industry. In the dreamy eyes of those old enthu-

siasts a metropolitan skyline beckoned to the heavens to rest upon the peak of their hill. To this day the blank, windowless sides of tall brick houses testify to that naïve hope of a residence district cramped into city blocks. The back country farms and hayfields were subdivided, while building sites along the brow of the Hill were coveted as seats next the Eternal Throne.

Then even the inflated dreams of the most imaginative citizen faded before the elaborate materialization of Jim Price's family air castle. An architect from Boston was invited to spare no expense, and all Hamlin waited breathless while an enormous white mansion reared unfamiliar walls and imposing cupola on high. As a temple to Mansard it may have lacked a certain faithfulness to detail which a less inspired architect would have deemed proper, but as a monument to Hamlin's prosperity and a beacon to her aspiration it was a triumph.

Although several palatial homes sprang up in immediate response to old Jim's challenge, and even a house or two by Bulfinch would seem to have set up a rival claim to distinction, still the Price mansion was always the 'Big House.'

Just as the town had been dominated by the stream in the days when it was choked from bank to bank with crowding logs, now both became subject to the Hill. The Hill itself was ruled over by the Big House, and the dwellers therein were like unto the Pharaohs of old — the Big House. The road which had been worn along the shoulder of the Hill was cut into a broad highway

and christened Churchill Street, named in impartial piety for the Church and the Hill. It was divided in the center by a wide mall, bordered with slender elms whose lofty broom tops were to sweep the sky in years to come.

Because of Jim Price's forehandedness, his lot was not a mere lot, in the citified sense of the word. He had bought up a rolling tract of land with a fine grove of big pine and fir marking its northern limits. A brook ran through one of the lower meadows, and there was an apple orchard in need of pruning, but still bearing lusty fruit. Beyond the crumbling foundations of a burned farmhouse there was a blueberry patch which colored the granite ledges to the east a bright scarlet every fall. Jim Price's place was an estate.

The Big House stood well to the fore in its spacious grounds, near enough Churchill Street to command a broad view of the mall, yet removed from the class of mere houses by a long curving drive, which, in its meandering sweep to the front door, seemed to suggest that a respectful hesitation was the most fitting manner of approach.

Perhaps the Big House had existed for over half a century in the dreams of the little boy who had gone into the woods at twelve and had done a man's work till past seventy. Perhaps as he lay in his woodsman's bunk, gazing out into a night full of trees, he saw a huge white palace with soft lights warming its high narrow windows, and a lofty cupola reaching above the tree-tops. Perhaps the peering eyes of curious deer penetrated

his dream, so that years later when the vision came true those timid forest shapes must be incorporated into the scene. For one of the first things old Jim did to beautify his pasture-land was to set a scattered herd of iron deer as a guard about his house.

He also got a large and fancy fountain for the front lawn, ostensibly to provide a fat iron cherub with a stream of bubbles in season. But at sunrise old Jim liked to watch the birds gather at his fountain for their ablutions, and sometimes at twilight he would listen from the library window to their praise of his crumbs.

He cared nothing for flowers in general, allowing his wife to have her woman's way with such minor truck. But he planted a bed of lilies-of-the-valley in the shadows down by the brook. He loved them as he did his deer, and told no one the reason why.

When one thought of the Prices, one never remembered Osgood, Jim's younger brother. He was an odd Price, small, thin, quarrelsome, and weakly dissipated. He had fooled around one of the family sawmills for a time, and then drifted down-river after a disagreement with Jim.

But when news of the plans for the Big House reached Osgood's part of the State, he caused giant blocks of granite to be cut from his own quarry, and one day the schooner Abbie Price towed up-river loaded with this offering to his brother. And so the great stone wall, the front steps, and even the pedestals for the iron deer were solid blocks of family granite. Even was the

Big House itself founded on the bedrock of Price tradition.

While old Jim strove to express his dominant personality in the grounds of the Big House, the inner details were left to the inspiration of the architect and the gentle interference of Mrs. Price. Hamlin was too recently out of the woods to find satisfactory expression for its pioneer spirit in an Old-World interior.

Jim's wife was always a little shy of the Big House, and in so far as her plain individuality could impress itself upon her magnificent new home, it was manifested by horse-hair and black walnut, worsted mats, wax flowers, and hand-wrought antimacassars.

She did make this concession to fashion. The mahogany highboy, four-poster, and spindle-legged tables, which her mother had imported from England, and which had been shipped to Hamlin from Salem, Massachusetts, in her father's own vessel, were stored away in the attic. The Big House had no shed, so it was by merest accident that the Price mahogany did not share the ignominious fate of much colonial furniture, which had been good enough for the houses down by the stream, but unsuitable for the Hill.

Old Jim had insisted upon saving his beloved *étagère*. It had been brought from Paris to his bride, but from the first he had claimed it for his particular shrine. On the top shelf reposed a rock from the top of Mount Katahdin, and in lesser positions were ranged the accumulated treasures of his life in the woods: there was a loon's egg, a

little birchbark canoe decorated with moose hair, the scalp of a wood drake with its gorgeous feathers carefully brushed free of dust, a little barrel whittled out of wood and filled with spruce gum (a little boy treasure, that) various sticky photographs on leather of fellow woodsmen or favorite Indians, and a row of long, hooked beaver teeth as brightly polished as red lacquer. There was a story or a bit of sentiment connected with each boyish trophy.

Frightened by the old Indian legend of Mount Katahdin, little Jimmie Price had braved the wrath of Pamola, the wind god who blew terrific storms from the peak of the mountain and destroyed all men who sought to reach the summit. And there was his rock, brought back as naïve testimony to his daring.

His loon's egg held the same relative position in his affection as did the polished conch shells and coral branches in the sea captains' hearts down-river.

Jim Price's drawing-room, which extended the full length of the house, was higher posted by two feet than any other private room in town. From its elaborately decorated ceiling a crystal chandelier, such as wept icy tears over the head of Marie Antoinette, caught the slanting rays of the New England sun in a hundred quivering pendants. Imported brocade hung in sculptured folds at the narrow windows, held with broad brass clamps, incongruous to the last degree, considering the worsted tidies, but impressive.

Large oil paintings, some atrociously bad,

some fortuitously good, had been selected by old Jim himself, and looked out from ornate gold frames, unquestionably genuine leaf.

Even the Brussels carpets, upon which all the Hill trod with a new and daintier step, seemed to muffle the pompous march of the Prices in a deeper pile.

Connoisseurs and period furnishing were to come later, after it became fashionable for Hamlin to go traveling for pleasure. It was not until Jim Price's grandchildren came to realize and to signify the importance of being born Prices that the Big House made its supreme gesture toward continental elegance.

Where the elms are tallest now and the mall is greenest, and the lawns of the Big House slope down to the granite wall, did High Street first dare to intersect. On the corner opposite old Jim Price, Ed Lawrence, of the Boston Lawrences, laid his corner-stone, and then unostentatiously bought up the other two corners, while Jim Price was busy planting iron deer. One he let go to the trustees of the Unitarian Church, which moved over from its bleak site on the back side of the Hill to point with conspicuous spire the way of all liberal Hamlin. The other lot he held until it multiplied in value. After years of neighborly warfare over that coveted territory, he sold it to the Prices for their eldest son. Traditions were coined overnight in those days, so when James Price built a modest imitation of the Big House in the center of his costly acre, it was named the

'Other House,' and became known as the hereditary dwelling of the heir.

Along the sparless water-front a row of low brick buildings sprang up, and in unassuming offices the old pioneers laid plans for the future glory of their city and their families. Far away from ringing axe and prodding peavey, the curl of wood smoke and the keen tang of corn bread and beans, they conducted their operations, until the time came when their sons must be called home from the northern border to be introduced to the mysteries of stumpage and undivided estates. Then the old men, too, were called Home and the Hill was a generation old.

The amenities of the new era spread a balm of comfort and luxury over domestic and social life. There fell a vesper hush, that twilight calm which comes to ease the weariness of an arduous day. The age of leisure had dawned.

The gentle wives of the old men lingered a while to enjoy the peace. It seems as though the pioneer spirit of New England obtained even in the order of their last going. The old pioneers insisted upon their right of leadership unto that last frontier, the gateway of the unknown. Each family sent its man on ahead, and the solitary mistress of the proud establishment waited with patient dignity until her lord had prepared one of the 'many mansions' promised for her reception.

With leisure came the desire for luxury, and Hamlin was installing modern bathrooms, with running water supplied by force pumps in the kitchens, while Boston, and cities 'to the west-

ward,' were just awakening to the fact that bathtubs were not restricted to the buried history of the Island of Crete. Across the river whale-oil lamps had given place to a strange new illumination called 'fluid.' On the Hill there were pendant atrocities giving forth the strange odor of kerosene; then in one or two of the finest houses gas fixtures made their appearance. Instead of the deep brick fireplaces with ovens in the chimneys, which had warmed the houses on the waterfront, the homes on the Hill had shallow coal grates under their polished marble mantels.

Family surreys and carryalls were shipped back into the country, and the gravelled bed of Churchill Street gritted under the smart clip-clop of shining spans and sprayed its fine flint from the radiant wheels of sedate victorias.

The capitals of Europe began to contribute their share to the culture of the Hill, and it was said that nowhere on the continent was America more politely represented than by these ladies and gentlemen from Hamlin, Maine.

CHAPTER III

THE little elms which Jim Price and Ed Lawrence had helped to plant had entwined their branches in a long triumphal arch over the mall. Electric arc-lights relieved the flickering corner gas-lamps, which used to blur the darkness with a murky yellow glow. A new macadam road led straight out Churchill Street to the country club.

Many of the houses downtown had lost their colonial lines in business blocks. Others had been burned, when no one had tried to save them in the excitement of the inevitable sawmill fires. The rumble of 'jiggers' over rough cobbles echoed the passing of the old order, for Hamlin had deteriorated into a wholesale grocery and grain mart for the thriving potato country round about.

Like carrying coals to a bygone Newcastle, an occasional coaster towed up-river with pulpwood. There was a pungent smell of cheap coffee on the breeze — the paper mill, that new stench which assailed proud noses born to the balm of hemlock and fir.

Old Jim Price had long since surrendered the Big House to his son James, and James's eldest son Matthew had become squire of the Other House. Ed Lawrence had joined old Jim on neutral ground at last, and their sons carried on the feud in a desultory fashion. Then Matthew

Price married Ed's granddaughter Harriet Lawrence, and only an infrequent bicker reminded them of those sterner days of living strife.

Contrary to Price custom, and causing much secret disapproval among the prolific old families on the Hill, Matthew and his wife had no children. There had been one, who mercifully had died at the age of two, but was never mentioned. And so it came to pass that the heir of Grandpa Price was no Price at all, not even an heir for that matter, but Victoria, orphaned daughter of Grandpa's youngest child Emily, and a Vennard of Portsmouth.

Emily Price's erratic behavior was still discussed on the Hill in connection with modern anecdotes concerning the younger generation. Nothing in the dissolute present could rival the escapade of Emily Price.

Her daughter Victoria was made to listen to the disgraceful tale as a warning, on occasions when she exhibited more of the Vennard strain than Aunt Harriet could brook. It was hoped that she could be made to feel the burden of her ancestry, and was well versed in the sins of her parents.

Victoria had listened to the tale in fitting humility, but it had never failed to thrill her. It was the only interesting bit of family lore she had ever heard. Told by Aunt Harriet, any possible romantic angle was altered to point out a lesson. The moral of the tale was supposed to be: 'The wages of sin is death.' As a matter of fact, nothing could have endowed her mother with

more dramatic charm, nor her father with so heroic a glamour.

Emily Price was sent to a finishing school near Boston. Just before the opening of one Easter vacation, she directed a petition to the Big House to be allowed to remain in Boston over the holidays as the guest of a schoolmate. The request was refused on the grounds that the family of the schoolmate was unknown to the Prices. Furthermore, Emily's parents were very much hurt and shocked that she should wish to spend her vacation anywhere but at home. That was Crime Number One. Then for the first time in Grandpa Price's experience, one of his children mutinied. Emily wrote that if they didn't send their consent by return mail, she'd stay without it. Her father wired the mistress of the school to hold Emily until he could get there, but the order came too late. The mistress supposed that Emily had gone home. Investigating wires were sent to the homes of all Emily's friends, and the family in Hamlin suffered terrible suspense. Not until her own letter arrived had her family any idea whether she was alive or dead. Aunt Harriet believed that worry in itself to have killed Emily's mother.

Through the connivance of a schoolmate, Emily had been meeting a lieutenant from the Boston Navy Yard. The letter announced her marriage to Lieutenant Victor Vennard. Unfortunately for their secrecy, Victor's ship was ordered to Portsmouth, the home of his family. The third crime in the category was the fact of

their living in hiding, in some little back street, instead of confessing their marriage at once to his family. Aunt Harriet shook her head ominously over this chapter, and passed it over with dark implications instead of sharp detail.

James Price had written, through his lawyer, to the father of Lieutenant Vennard, demanding that the marriage be annulled, and threatening to use his influence in Washington to have his culprit son-in-law court-martialed.

The senior Vennard had replied, also through his lawyer, that the legitimacy of a possible child might concern the maternal grandfather quite as vitally as himself. There had followed an exchange of incivilities, which had culminated in the bitter feud which formed part of Victoria's early background. There was much she did not understand, having been brought up on the Price version.

She thought it rather rough on the schoolmate, who had introduced the elopers, that she was so heavily blamed. Her innocent act was construed as treason to the Big House, and by it she lost both caste and identity.

But Victoria could thoroughly appreciate her mother's humiliating position when the battleship sailed for China bearing away her husband, and leaving her to have her baby alone or beg to come home. She would have liked to know more about those two months into which her mother's whole happiness was crowded. She always felt that the drab little room where the promise of her very own self had been made was her true birth-

place, and not the lofty guest-chamber of the Big House. For it had been a quaint, spinster-like idea of Madam Price not to allow the child of that unconventional union to desecrate the virginity of her daughter's room with its birth.

Victoria wondered with angry blood prickling in her cheeks just how Grandma Price had felt when her youngest child had pleaded to be carried back into her own room to die. She knew what Grandpa's remorse had been, but she couldn't remember Grandma. Emily had begged that her baby be kept in her own sweet room, where pink roses scrambled over the wall. She hated the silver urns on the guest-room paper. They made her think of funerals. She didn't think the baby would like them either.

It puzzled Victoria, too, that immediately after the funeral Emily's room had been repapered, but the guest-room urns were there to-day. Was it sentimentality, remorse, or irony that the roses her mother loved were destroyed, or was it a deep-seated capacity for pure cruelty which made Grandma Price spare those hateful urns?

The only part which really hurt — and, oh, how she hated Aunt Harriet's way of telling it — was that her father had never come back to the Big House for his baby. She had been named for him with her mother's dying breath. Old Hannah had been there. She had heard, and Victoria surmised that that was the only reason the christening had stood. Hannah would have whispered among the servants. Besides, no one suspected that the baby was going to live.

A properly humiliating letter addressed to Lieutenant Vennard at Shanghai accused and convicted him of direct complicity in the death of Emily Price. The incidental fact of the baby was mentioned. He was very ill at the time and waited months before answering. Then his letter was defiant, or was so considered by the family. Hannah confessed to Victoria, years after, that she had hunted up the letter and spelled it out to her own satisfaction. It was her opinion that the poor lad was crazed with the death of his wife, and maybe a bit touched with fever. He had expressed formal wish for the child's happiness, and enclosed an order on the Government, which he said would be the amount he would be able to pay each month, enlarging it with future increase in rank. The money order was returned without comment. He was killed two years later in an explosion during target practice off Hampton Roads. Hannah assured Victoria that it had been the shock, and not at all that he had been blown to bits, but Victoria suspected that it was just Hannah's way of erasing an unpleasant mind picture with an innocuous fib.

The little story served this purpose for Victoria. She believed in romance — the stuff songs are made of. She was glad to know that in her cold and unloving family there had been this bit of real beauty.

It was ridiculous, Aunt Harriet was forever saying, for Victoria to imagine that she loved her mother, or felt anything at all but an impersonal reverence for the fact of her motherhood. She

must strive not to encourage in herself the very quality of fatuous thought which had been her mother's ruin. She must guard against sentimental idealization. It wasn't healthy.

But some day Victoria planned to repaper her mother's room with climbing pink roses. Hannah had told her just what to get. And she was going to keep a majolica dish of pink verbenas on the deep window ledge, and she knew where the mahogany sewing-table was that belonged in that room. Aunt Harriet had it. Hannah was keeping the pictures in her room — pale cream-colored prints of sea-birds and windmills and chubby little boys throwing snowballs.

Those colorless drawings in their prim white and silver frames always typified to Victoria her mother's early life, cool, chaste, and unruffled as cream on a skimming pan, till her father came. Then he took off all the cream, and left only skimmed milk behind. Victoria smiled inwardly as she thought of how like skimmed milk Aunt Sarah's thin, veined hands looked.

Although Grandpa Price was Victoria's legal guardian, and his sister Sarah was mistress of the Big House after Grandma Price followed Emily, it was Hannah, the cook, who had been her real foster mother.

When Hannah came to work for the Prices, a green Irish girl from County Cork, she was named Mary, but old Jim Price's wife was Mary too, so he rechristened the girl in his high-handed way, and she had borne the uncompromising Yankee name of Hannah ever since.

After the death of Victoria's mother, the baby had been almost entirely restricted to the ell, since her crying annoyed Grandpa. Aunt Sarah could not bear the sight of the physical manifestation of Emily's secret affair. The baby was not only the direct cause of Emily's death, but she reminded them all of the sole breath of scandal which had ever touched their name — that is, it would have been scandal had it not concerned the impeccable name of Price.

Grandpa made a solemn pilgrimage to the nursery every evening at Victoria's supper-time. But for the nurse, whom he hated and distrusted with her smug cap, and her ghoulish air of knowing too much about birth and death, he thought perhaps he might lift the child on his knee. She rather interested him with her sturdy indifference to them all. Too bad she wasn't a boy — poor little brat. He supposed she'd have a tough time of it with the family.

Soon Victoria's unmistakably developing brogue made it obvious that she must have a more suitable mother than Hannah. Matthew Price's epileptic son died when Victoria was three. They were heart-broken, for Harriet was told that there must never be another child. So it was decided by family conclave that Victoria should become the charge of Matthew and Harriet, as a comfort to them in their bereavement.

Aunt Harriet soon found that Victoria was anything but a comfort, but she tackled her problem with the zeal of a martyr. It secretly delighted Grandpa that Harriet had caught a porcu-

pine by the tail, and he was relieved that the baiting was done over at the other house, his meals had fallen off so when Hannah had been disciplining the baby. Yes, Hannah was certainly less temperamental about the coffee since Victoria had been moved over to Matthew's.

CHAPTER IV

THERE was always something feudal about the Prices. They had pride in the fact that their holdings were the largest in northern Maine, and rather than relinquish that distinction to the Lawrences or the Woods they had been willing to allow the property to descend English fashion, from father to eldest son, and to accept an income for life from the heir.

Unlike the great English estates, however, the old lumbermen properties represented fractional interests in the timber cut from many different townships, and were known as undivided estates. The feudal element was felt in the sum of percentages rather than vast territory. To administer an undivided estate owned by dozens of heirs is an intricate feat, so as a matter of convenience as well as pride the property had been kept intact. It vested the Big House with immense prestige, while it placed the expectant generation more or less on probation, for the disposal of Grandpa Price's property was a matter of tradition, not obligation.

The fortune was only one generation old when he had inherited the bulk of it from Jim Price, Senior, and the second James had carried on vigorously, and some said unscrupulously within the law, the campaign for money-making laid down by his father. It was his by right of conquest as well as inheritance.

Bertram, the younger son of James, married a year before Emily died, and his child, being a boy, was considered by every one to take precedence over Victoria. Little Ernest had been singled out by many a far-sighted mother on the Hill as a youth worth cultivating when daughters were growing up.

All of which accounts for the thrusting gaze which Harriet Price sent into Aunt Sarah's misty eyes on that morning when Grandpa had sent for Victoria. And therefore a great fluttering in old Hannah's vigilant heart that night, when she saw Seth Lawton drive in the back way. He was James Price's old school friend and legal adviser. Later Hannah had heard the doctor's car at the front door, followed by the young man who read in Lawton's office, and a friend of his in their wheezing 'one-lunger.'

Aunt Sarah sat in her low chair before an empty grate in the back parlor, rocking herself gently to and fro. Only her softly slipped foot with its uneven tap-tap on the hearth rail betrayed her nervousness.

Matthew and Harriet over at the Other House, always acutely sensitive to sounds outside Grandpa's, heard Seth Lawton's buggy, also noting that he had gone in the back way. There was no one else in town who still drove around in an old top buggy. Seth Lawton also wore a linen duster, as if he were still in his father's grain store, and he smoked a corn-cob pipe.

Harriet opened the center panel of the front parlor shutters and framed the ominously patient

buggy. There was a light in Grandpa's room, but none in the back parlor. Hannah must be abroad on business, for there were lights both in her room and the kitchen, and it wasn't bread night.

Harriet had been gravely puzzled ever since Victoria had returned from her mysterious interview with her grandfather, wearing that secret, brooding look which baffled every one. She stood the suspense just as long as she could, hoping that Matthew would speak first. At last she burst out with consciously repressed exasperation.

'Matthew, I do think you ought to go over.'

'But why should I go over when I have not been summoned, and what do you propose for me to do when I get there? Kindly answer me that.'

'And will you kindly tell me why you have not been summoned? If it is anything to do with Grandpa's personal business, who else but you should be there at his bedside?'

'Bedside, nonsense! He'll outlive us all!'

'You leap at conclusions, Matthew,' said Harriet softly. 'I am not hinting at a death-bed scene. Surely you will admit that one may have a bedside without dying, and when your father is ill, your place is at that bedside.'

'On the contrary, my dear, I maintain that if the business, or rather, as you more gracefully put it, the — er — illness is what we think it is, I am the last one who should be present. Surely you are familiar enough with legal matters to know that.'

Harriet screwed her lips tight. 'If the business you refer to has been done at all, it was done years

ago. I don't like the looks of things to-night. It seems queer, Matthew, and you must admit that when I feel a premonition, it is apt to be right.'

'That is neither here nor there. I tell you for the twentieth time, my dear Harriet, I shall not go over until I am summoned. They have a telephone, you know. There is no need to send out a courier.'

Harriet sighed to indicate that the sarcasm was noted, but ignored from choice.

'But they may not want the servants to know, and perhaps Aunt Sarah won't call you. It may be one of her off nights. Where do you suppose she is? Surely not with Grandpa. Matthew, I think it is only decent for you to go over and see how Aunt Sarah is. She has been under an awful strain. These attacks of his take it out of her dreadfully. I thought she was going to have another stroke when she came over to get Victoria.'

Matthew indulged his face in the luxury of a swift, sarcastic smile. His countenance was normally devoid of expression. It was a broad, stout face, not fat, but hard and solid. The nose and upper cheeks were lined with tiny pink veins, as if pressure from within were forcing the blood too near the surface. The eyes, like blue china marbles, stared pompously from puffy lids. Pale, sorrel brows and lashes intimated that the hair and stiff gray mustache had once been red. An even row of blunt white teeth rather brightened the stolid mouth when it partly revealed them in a creaseless smile. A horizontal groove just below the chest served for a waist line, and from

there downward the torso broadened and thickened till Matthew terminated in two brightly polished, square British toes.

Had Matthew belonged to his father's generation, he would have worn a diamond ring on his third finger instead of the massive signet ring which pressed up a ridge of soft white flesh around his pudgy little finger. His pearl-gray tie was pinless. His father had joined the Masons for frankly political reasons, and Matthew joined because his father had, and he was no dissenter; but no mystic symbol decorated the smooth front of his waistcoat.

He took another cigar from the hammered silver humidor on the table, the third since dinner. As he drew upon its grateful fragrance, his indifferent gaze fell upon his wife, seated at her own side of the table. She was knitting now with furious calm, each stab a mortal blow, each added stitch echoing the count of the knitters at the guillotine. Her high, narrow forehead was thrown into unflattering relief by the tilted reading-lamp. Her dark eyes could barely shield their crackling fire with lowered lids. Her thin mouth was drawn tight into habitual pleats over long protruding teeth. A pendulous sack beneath her chin shook with the vehemence of her knitting.

Victoria was upstairs in bed.

An hour later the buggy was trotted away. The light went out in Grandpa's room, out in the kitchen, on and off with spiteful haste in Aunt Sarah's room, but a dull yellow line glowed steadily and cheerfully far into the night from under old Hannah's crooked shade.

CHAPTER V

AFTER breakfast on Saturday mornings the Other House was rendered uninhabitable by Victoria's music lesson. At this hour Aunt Harriet went to market and Uncle Matthew made a call on his father.

The day following Seth Lawton's unexplained visit being Saturday, it seemed to Matthew conventionally permissible to combine custom with expedience in a reconnoitering trip to the Big House. He wished Harriet distinctly to understand that he was not obeying her orders of the night before, nor the cryptic suggestions which embodied those orders at breakfast. They used code before Victoria. It had been decided not to question the child about her visit to the Big House. One could not quite trust Victoria.

Matthew was no diplomat, and, although he pretended to himself that this was merely an ordinary call, he knew in his heart that he was an unwilling plenipotentiary from his own camp to a suspiciously unfriendly one. Therefore, to cover up his uneasiness, he greeted Lena more familiarly than was his wont on Saturday mornings.

'Well, Lena, how is everything? You're looking fine yourself, this morning — what?'

Lena started as if he had slapped her on the back. In her twenty years as second maid in the Big House she had raised her profession to the

dignity of an art, and nothing annoyed or hurt her any more than a breach of etiquette on the part of those she served. Her ideal rôle was that of the perfect servant. Perhaps she aspired to form an esoteric class of one, for she guarded the sacred barriers between herself and her 'betters' as if she forever feared that promised day of equality of which she sometimes read with dismay. She held a socialist in the holy scorn in which good Marxians held the Tsar.

Lena took a prim step backward as Matthew slammed the outer door. Slamming the door was sheer bravado, for ever since he was a child he had known that it was forbidden by Aunt Sarah.

'Mr. Price is quite comfortable, sir,' Lena answered, retreating from the vestibule into the hall. Mr. Matthew looked so guiltily friendly this morning, she was almost afraid he was going to do something ungentlemanly. 'Miss Price is in the conservatory,' she added, stepping aside for him to pass. 'Shall I speak to her?'

'No — no. I'll go right up, I guess.'

Lena picked Matthew's hat from the carved chest where he had tossed it, and shook her head as she hung it firmly on the hall stand, then vanished into the shadows. There was something very unusual about Mr. Matthew.

He had always considered the long spiral staircase, which led from the lofty hall to an upper one of almost equal proportions, to be one of the most infernal contraptions on earth. His knees always ached and his heart swelled and thumped and echoed all over him. Damned if he wouldn't put

in an elevator the first thing he did after he moved over.

But this particular morning the climb seemed surprisingly short, and long before he was ready Matthew found himself standing before his father's door, feeling like a schoolboy outside the master's room, with nothing to say for himself. He knocked, then entered hurriedly as his father shouted:

'Come in, come in! What you knocking for? I could hear you puffing a mile away.'

Matthew's heart ceased its spasms and went into reverse. Disappointment, unformulated till that second, but now recognized as such filled his breast. His father was just the same.

There he sat in his big leather chair by the window: a black velvet and quilted satin dressing-gown hunched up in great folds over his shoulders and around his neck, the skirt of it trailing over the back of the chair. It gave his large head a peculiar sunken effect. But he was not sinking. Sarah had insisted upon dragging out the beautiful robe which Matthew had given him for Christmas, and he had refused to 'raise up' according to her exasperated directions. He had commanded his old blanket wrapper; she had left the room in a huff, and there he was. A faded horse blanket lay across his knees defying the velvet dressing-gown.

His sparse, grizzled hair stood on end, testifying to the fact that the toilet had been made under protest. His usually florid cheeks were gray, with

here and there a hectic stain, but his sharp blue eyes under their shaggy brows were clear, and his wide straight mouth was just as grim as ever. His big hooked nose with its ugly one-sided twist affected Matthew just as it always had. The big nose always seemed to sneer at him, even when it was more twisted than ever in one of his father's rare, gigantic smiles.

Grandpa Price was six-feet-four and built accordingly. Matthew always felt his own rather stalwart five-feet-nine-and-a-half dwindle down to zero when in the presence of the big nose. He always felt to blame for something he couldn't help. Harriet didn't know he felt that way, and he would die rather than have her know. He twirled the desk chair around to face his father and reached in his pocket for a cigar.

'Have one, Father?'

'No. If I've got to spend the rest of my life cooped up in one room, I can at least have fresh air.'

Matthew wistfully replaced his cigar.

'Well, Father, how are you, anyway? You gave us all — Harriet and me — the scare of our lives. Harriet was all for my coming over last night, but —'

'Glad you didn't. No need of it.'

'Just the way I looked at it. As I said to Harriet, if you had wanted me, I would have been summoned.' Matthew liked the sound of that word 'summoned.' It had had a pleasantly important ring last night when he had used it. It seemed to vest him with a special distinction. It

sounded military — it sounded deliciously portentous.

‘Wanted you? Why should I want you?’ his father demanded crossly. ‘I had Sarah and Hannah and Lena and God knows how many women running in and out. I did wonder once or twice how in the devil Harriet managed to stay away.’

‘Of course. But, well, the point is — she — we are very glad you are so much better. . . . What do you think of Lafayette? The News Bureau says it’s going to skip a dividend.’

‘T’so? Hang onto it. It’s bound to come back.’

‘Harriet wants to sell.’

‘Who’s your financial adviser, Harriet or me?’

Matthew got very red. ‘I merely told you that in her opinion we ought to get rid of it.’ He waited a minute. Then — ‘What does Lawton say?’

Grandpa’s ragged brows went up. ‘Lawton? Why Lawton? You mean Silsby, don’t you? Why don’t you ask him?’

‘I will. I’ll do that, Father.’

Matthew swayed to and fro in the swivel chair. He had got to get something out of the old man or Harriet would be over. Antagonistic as Matthew knew himself to feel toward his father, and uncomfortably aware as he was that his father reciprocated, still he felt loyal enough to want to spare him any unnecessary contact with Harriet. It was more a masculine fealty toward his own sex than any filial urge. And he wanted to spare himself the embarrassment of evading Harriet’s

exhausting questions. If he came back with no news, he couldn't enjoy his luncheon. If he did find out what was up, and Harriet absorbed it as her own, then that queer resentful feeling would give him indigestion before the dessert, and the desserts on Saturday were always excellent. They were sent over from Hannah's kitchen for Victoria's special edification. Harriet would pump him so. After all, how was it her business, anyway? Damn it all, if he did find out anything, he wouldn't tell her! Matthew felt delightfully rebellious. Why did she think she had to run his affairs? Let her try to boss the Lawrences and see how far she'd get with Tom, or John either, for that matter. It was going to be his property, and not hers, and the sooner she got used to the fact, the better for all concerned. He would say just that to Harriet. He felt his father's piercing eyes upon him, and he also knew that the nose was sneering. He had an uncomfortable sensation that he was being read by X-ray.

'Been down to the office this morning?' asked his father suavely.

Matthew's eyes popped in injured surprise. 'Why, Father, you know I never go down Saturdays. I — I always have to have my little business talks with you. In the afternoon the office is closed, and it's my golf.'

'Yes — yes — but I was wondering why, if you were a little worried over Lafayette, you didn't go down to the office and keep more in touch with things — kinder take my place till I can get out. You are my eldest son, Matthew, and you don't

know any more about my business — your grandfather's business — than Hannah does.'

Matthew was vaguely pleased to be called an eldest son, but the big nose had never looked so sarcastic.

'I — I just never got in the way of it, I guess. Silsby isn't very communicative, and the last time I made one or two suggestions to Miss Sullivan, her manner verged on the impertinent.'

'She's worked for us for twenty years, Matthew. She could tell you how much you spent for cigars in the year 1907, which is more than you could.'

Matthew laughed uneasily at this blunt pleasantry. Then suddenly he blurted out, 'What did old Lawton want, anyway?' He threw every ounce of moral and physical strength he possessed into that question, and then nearly choked when he heard how loud his voice sounded.

Grandpa Price smiled down into the bulging front of his dressing-gown and hunched the collar up to his ears. He didn't answer for a minute or two, and when he did Matthew was actually afraid of the crafty light which shot out from his father's drooping lids.

'Lawton came up to talk over old times, and the difference between old times and new times. We chinned about our fathers, his and mine, and how eighteen hours used to be considered a full day's work, and we recalled summer vacations, when Seth and I used to get up at three in the morning and walk up to the swimming-hole, because we liked swimming better than sleeping. And then

we'd walk back and start our day's work, he in the grain shed and I in the saw mill. And Sundays, we'd be so dog tired that it didn't seem as though we could move, come church time, but they'd oust us just the same as any other morning, and we'd have to drive the family in the carryall, because the hired man wouldn't work on Sunday. I never made you work in vacations, Matthew. I'm sorry. Then we compared the way we used to sweat with the way the men of your generation have to go to a massager to get up a normal perspiration. And we talked about socialism, and anarchy, and parasites, and unearned increments, and honesty and spunk, and marriage and death, and remorse, and — love. Don't keep fiddling with my blotter. I don't like the corners bent. And — well, in short, we touched upon just about everything, till we came to the comparative value of boys and girls in the present generation, and you can tell Harriet, if she should happen to ask, or Bert or Flora, or any of 'em, that the Big House is sick of Prices. It's going to set up a new breed, and the name of that breed is Vennard.'

Matthew stopped his twirling back and forth and sat very still. He felt the blood drain out of his cheeks and there was a far-away drumming in his ears. He thought he was going to faint. The blots on the big blue pad he had been staring at resolved themselves into swimming groups and then scattered. He closed his eyes to shut out the blur. When he was all right again, he opened them and looked at his father. He strove desperately to think of a dignified reply, but his father seemed

to have forgotten that he was there. He was gazing out of the window, and Matthew caught an expression on the gaunt old face that he had never seen before. The muscles of the jaw were working unsteadily as the old man ground his teeth in a battle for control. It had cost him something, too, this repudiation of their clan.

Matthew cleared his throat. 'I don't quite understand, Father. You mean you have made a new will? Is that what Lawton was up here for?' His mind seemed to be fixed on that point. He had come to find out. In the process he had felt his whole world slip from under him, yet it was his curiosity and not his pride which demanded first satisfaction.

The old man continued to stare down at the mall. He nodded his head. A certain innate delicacy caused him to refrain from looking at his disinherited son.

'You mean you put Victoria before me — your eldest son?'

'Yes.'

'I — I don't see how you could do it. I wish to God I was dead!'

Grandpa Price set all the coarse, deep lines around his mouth and nose and deliberately faced Matthew.

'The chances are you will be dead, long before I am. That is one reason why I took the step — one reason. There are many. Matthew, you have lived a very self-indulgent, lazy, indolent, unwholesome life, and I marvel that you are still alive to-day. Bertram, too, until lately, and I

surmise the reason for his belated interest. You are both a great disappointment to me. I might have told you this twenty years ago, but I tell you now.'

Matthew's eyes brightened for a second as he thought of Bertram and Flora and their promising son, who had dared to live while his poor little wretch had been taken. Ernest would never triumph over them.

'But, Father,' he said aloud, 'what about Ernest? Every one thinks that he — that you —'

'Then every one is wrong. I shall leave the precious child an inestimable legacy — the need of earning his own living.' He smiled his wry, ingrowing smile.

Matthew shook his head hopelessly at that. It was all too much. He was stunned.

'You trust Victoria, then, with her father and all?'

'I not only trust Victoria, but I advise the rest of you to do likewise. She'll hold the whole pack of you in the hollow of her hand. Don't any of you try to monkey with Victoria. Look at me, sir!'

Matthew raised his head.

'I want you distinctly to remember what I am saying now. I am in full possession of my faculties. Do you doubt it?'

'No.'

'And I've had my will so drawn that all the shyster lawyers in the State of Maine can't break it.'

There was a long silence during which Matthew

studied the high light on the toe of his boot. And then he spoke in a husky voice, thick with emotion, and struggling anger.

‘Have you told this to Victoria?’

‘No, and I don’t intend to either. I want to die before she is spoiled. I’ll run no risks of turning her into a sly, ingratiating little brat like Ernest.’

‘Promise me you won’t tell her, Father. It would be too humiliating to have to go on living with her after she knew.’

‘Why should I promise you something which I have no wish to tell? I forbid Victoria to be told. Now we’ll let it go at that!’

‘And what about me, or am I not your eldest son after this?’ Matthew tried to make his voice cool and sarcastic, but it was only plaintive.

‘You’ll be all right. Your father isn’t such an old devil as you seem to think.’ There was a jocular note in his voice which jarred on Matthew’s nerves. ‘I haven’t disturbed you at all, Matthew. Isn’t that what would please you the most? You’ll be just what you’ve always been, nothing but my eldest son. And I’ve left you just where you are for the rest of your life. You won’t have to move. I thought you’d be relieved to hear that!’ The elder Price chuckled in unpleasant glee. ‘You’ll have just what you’ve been getting from me, and that Lafayette if you hang on, and Harriet will have your share till she dies. Same to Bert and Flora. Then, after I’m gone, a new dynasty, ruled over by my little Queen Victoria. The greatest estate in northern Maine! Hers every

bit of it! Hers the Big House and her mother's room, by God!

'The Big House!' Matthew hadn't quite taken that in.

'Yes, and the day she moves in, Sarah moves out. She can live with you, Matthew. Then you and Harriet won't be bothered by music lessons or puppy dogs or polly-wogs or climbing trees or anything. You can turn your house into a damned old tomb and stay right there till doomsday!'

Matthew rose ponderously. There came a rush of purple to his face. He steadied himself on the edge of the desk for a second and then addressed his father.

'Victoria is at liberty to move back to the house where she was born to-morrow.'

He had intended that to hurt, and it did.

'It's too late,' said his father quietly. 'This is no place for a child now. Kindly be careful of your insinuations, will you, Matthew? They don't sound well coming from an eldest son.'

'Matthew took a deep breath. 'I consider that you have insulted your eldest son, sir, but because you are a sick man I propose to pass over certain statements of yours unchallenged — for example, my unwholesome life.' Matthew paused. He wished he hadn't said that. It didn't strike just the note intended. 'Since I am disqualified from coming into my rightful own as my grandfather's natural heir, I refuse to set foot in this house again.'

Somehow he managed to turn around and stalk

out of the room with just the swaggering hauteur he desired. It was a great comfort to him as he rehearsed the scene over and over again. He had not weakened. He had had the last word. He hoped he could picture to Harriet just how haughty had been that exit.

CHAPTER VI

HARRIET met him at the door and Matthew managed to blurt the facts out in a few words. Some of it was just between his father and himself.

If Harriet was hit, she took it like a man. She merely drew up her high square shoulders, and allowed her eyes to blaze forth a volley of angry fire.

'Then at last we know where we stand,' she said, as she motioned Matthew into the front parlor, which was quite cut off from the rest of the house. She drew the portières lest a sound drift to the servants' ears.

Matthew sank down on a slender rosewood calling seat, and rested his plump little hands on his knees. He was weak. He wanted to cry, but one could not cry on Harriet.

'Haven't you a cigar, Matthew?' asked his wife accusingly, her eyes narrowing as she probed his blank face for signs of guilt. An outsider might never have suspected that Harriet was expressing sympathy, but Matthew knew. A command to smoke before lunch, and in the front parlor at that, was a caress from Harriet.

Matthew pulled out the cigar he had offered his father, and smoothed its rumpled bark. He looked around helplessly, and then remembered that he had tucked a box of matches in his pocket. After he had got it going, and he had heaved a

few catching sighs of relief, like the sobbing breaths of a little boy who has been crying, he turned his round blue eyes to Harriet. They were eloquent of injured perplexity.

'Well,' said Harriet, 'what are you going to do about it?'

That was not what Matthew expected. He didn't want action. He wanted sympathy. He guessed he wanted his mother, though he hadn't thought of her for years. He had gone over there at the instigation of his wife to find out what was up. He had found out, and much good it had done them. Now he wished to shake off all further responsibility. The last thing on earth he felt like was doing something.

'Do?' he repeated querulously — 'do? What is there left to do? I should think everything has been done as far as we are concerned. Besides, it isn't as if he had cut us off. We're awfully comfortable, Harriet, and we've got this house as long as we live, and then with what you'll get from your father, things aren't so bad.'

Harriet regarded him with puzzled scorn. 'Your father has just demonstrated that he doesn't consider you capable of carrying on the Big House, and you say things are not so bad! I say they are unspeakable, and I do not propose to put up with them.'

'But what can you do?' Matthew involuntarily shifted the action to the second person.

'Nothing at present. I should think your father was demented, but it would be very hard to prove.'

Matthew thought of the clear, snapping blue eyes and the unquestionable sanity of the big nose and shook his head decidedly.

‘And we couldn’t prove undue influence,’ she continued, ‘for Victoria is a minor. Of course it is just his eccentric whim, but I suppose it is legal. Too bad he didn’t cut you off entirely. Then it would be easy.’

‘We’ll have just what we always have had,’ interpolated Matthew.

‘Pstz! I have always known that your father hated me. I supposed it was because he and Grandfather quarreled over this ridiculous lot, but evidently it was more personal. I am glad, in a way, for I have always hated him, even as a child, when he used to scold us for getting in the flower beds. What does surprise me, though, is that your father, in his exaggerated egotism, could despise anything by the name of Price. You must have fallen pretty low, Matthew. I didn’t dream that once a Price wasn’t always a Price. However, as I say, I am glad to know it. It clears up several points. We know your father hates us, and he knows we hate Victoria, or he wouldn’t have done it.’

Matthew pursed up his small, tight mouth at that. ‘Putting it pretty strong, isn’t it?’

‘Very well, then I hate Victoria,’ corrected Harriet.

‘But — but she’s a little girl.’

‘I know — but she’s big enough to have fleeced you out of your inheritance, and she won’t always be a little girl.’

'You can hate her, then,' grinned Matthew willfully. 'If I've got to, I'm going to wait till she grows up.'

Harriet said: 'I knew from the second that child came to live with us that she was a potential trouble-maker, and you know when I feel things they are very apt to be true. I admit that I didn't dream of anything as terrible as this. I thought she'd run away with a barber, or do something downright dishonest. She is sly, Matthew. I wish you could hear the things Flora tells me about her and Ernest. She puts him up to the naughtiest tricks!' Harriet stopped. Her whole face relaxed. 'Ernest!' she whispered. 'Matthew! Ernest! He won't get it, after all! Why — why — I don't know how I was so stupid. I couldn't seem to take it all in. I was so horrified at his sticking Victoria over your head that I didn't realize till this minute that he has cut out Ernest!'

Harriet allowed herself several seconds in which to let the felicity of this thought permeate her troubled brain, while Matthew blew big, self-conscious smoke rings toward the ceiling.

'What I've been trying to tell you,' he said, neatly seizing the advantage. Three very successful gray hoops ascended pompously on high. Matthew smiled at his wife in superior composure. 'You begin to see that things aren't so bad — eh? What father really did was to snub the head off Bertram, not me.'

Matthew started to tell her about the early demise his father had so harshly prophesied, but, although it might waken startled sympathy, he

knew that it would mean a diet. He forgot for the moment the capital insult for which he had spurned his father's house forever. He was trying to comfort Harriet. 'Don't you see, dear, that Father regards Victoria as our own child? He practically turned her over to us. Well, he has put our child — our adopted child — in over Bertram's. It's the very next best thing to having —' He couldn't finish. They couldn't speak of the other one, even to each other. 'Think, Harriet, think it over, before you let any one hear you say that you hate Victoria.'

'I am thinking,' said Harriet. 'Let me alone.'

CHAPTER VII

VICTORIA ate a hearty luncheon and then skipped out the back door for a flying visit to Hannah. It was early fall and the gutters were filling with bright leaves, so Victoria scuffed up her gutter to the end of the block, and down her grandfather's gutter in order to cross High Street. The kitchen door of the Big House stood open, and Victoria flattened her nose against the screen.

'Come in, Lamby,' called Hannah. 'The screen's unlocked. Mind the flies.'

Victoria brushed through a meager opening, admitting not a single sticky enemy, and slipped into a chair at the end of Hannah's long table. She was a little in awe of Grandpa's staff when she found them gathered in the kitchen. Lena and Rose were washing dishes in the butler's pantry, and turned from their task to nod discreet greetings to Miss Victoria. Lundstrom, the chauffeur, was strolling in from the servants' dining-room carrying his own dishes. Peter, the old gardener, was mending the handle of Hannah's pet bread knife, scowlingly supervised by her.

Victoria drew her feet up to the highest rung and clasped her knees and waited. She never talked when the others were there, but she liked to sit still and watch them. One good thing about Grandpa's kitchen was that neither he nor Aunt Sarah ever penetrated farther back than the

dining-room, and after the other servants went off about their business, Victoria and Hannah could talk for hours undisturbed.

Hannah was making a great to-do scraping the rest of the chocolate sauce out of the silver bowl into a kitchen cup. The brown agate ice-chest dishes stood in a row, their covers off ready to receive contributions from silver and crystal and old Canton blue.

Victoria ran a swift finger around the edge of the silver bowl.

‘Don’t do that, Lamby,’ said Hannah mechanically, without looking up. ‘Ye’ve had plenty. How was the cream puffs?’

‘Fine.’

‘Did she let ye have two?’

‘Three.’

‘Whut?’ Hannah raised incredulous hands and let them sink upon her wide hips.

‘First time in her life she ever let me have thirds on anything,’ Victoria added in a whisper, her cautious eye on Lena’s unsympathetic back.

Hannah hummed a low, tuneless song and turned back to old Peter. ‘There, that’s something like,’ she grunted as he shuffled out.

This great kitchen was Victoria’s familiar tavern. She loved every bit of it, from the big, clean, blue-and-white squares, which made such excellent hop-sotch, to the important maze of brass pipes which ran around the walls and across the ceiling. There were two stoves, one enormous square one with two ovens, which Hannah called

hers, and a modern coal and gas range upon which Rose and Lena made extras. The stoves always looked to Victoria like negro slaves with grinning nickel teeth. She liked the double row of pink copper kettles, and scorned with Hannah the aluminum intruders which got black so quickly. There was always a friendly smell about Hannah's kitchen, as if the fragrant ghosts of bygone dinners still haunted the stronghold of their creator.

Hannah gave Victoria some steel knives to polish with a big cork and fine bath brick. She loved to fit the big, rounded blades into their dug-out and to smear the smooth old board with pleasant gritty black. Besides, it wasn't just play; it was helping Hannah.

After a while they heard the whining purr of Lundstrom's engine and the muffled roll of Lena's carpet sweeper in the dining-room. Rose was hanging out dish towels, which was her last downstairs duty.

Then Hannah and Victoria were alone, with just the sleepy singing of the tea-kettle and the patient limping of the wall clock. They played that an old, old dwarf lived in the downstairs part of the clock. He was a kind of a lighthouse keeper who 'tended to the works above. He was a little lame in one foot, so he came down heavily on the other — *tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock*.

'I guess she must have been going for Uncle Matthew again,' remarked Victoria, as she polished her last knife. 'He didn't want his cream puff.'

‘He didn’t, eh?’ replied Hannah, with a little quirk to her lips.

‘No, he just sat and stared at it, and when I asked Aunt Harriet if I could have it, she pushed the whole business over to me without a word. Uncle Matthew had put the sauce on, himself, so you can imagine!’

‘She eat anny?’ inquired Hannah sharply.

‘No, she’s not eating desserts. Afraid of getting fat.’

‘She’ll not get fat now, I’m tellin’ ye,’ nodded Hannah.

Victoria looked puzzled. ‘Hannah, what are you so tickled about? You look as if you were winking to yourself. Is it a surprise? You’ve got to tell me!’

‘Wait and I make sure Lena’s gone-up, and I’ll tell ye. Come closer.’

Victoria climbed up on the table and sat as near Hannah as she could.

‘You mind the night Mr. Lawton was up? Saints bless us! It was only last night!’

‘I didn’t know,’ whispered Victoria, her eyes bright with Hannah’s secret.

‘Well, he was, and I heard whut they said.’

‘Did you peek?’ gasped Victoria, suppressing an excited giggle.

‘I did not, ye sauce jade. I laid me good ear to the door. There was need for some one to know whut wint on that time. If I was a young woman, I’d not tell ye now, and if I could write it out so’s they’d believe it, I’d not — but I’m not young at-all, and my soul could get no rest in Purgatory if

I die without lettin' ye know whut I heard. Yer grandfather's left the whole of his property to yerself.'

Victoria's long hazel eyes grew round as saucers, and she shivered at the mystery in Hannah's voice. It was so wonderful to have secrets with Hannah.

'Go on!'

'Go on? Ye small pig! Whut else do ye want? Oh, save us, if ye ain't the bold piece of furniture! I want ye should understand whut I'm tellin' ye, once and fer all. Thin I don't want ye to be talkin' about it. Not a word to a soul but me! Yer grandfather's will — I heard ivery word of it. He's leavin' the Big House to you, darlin'. Ye'll be the richest gurl in the town, let alone the whole State!'

Victoria threw her arms around Hannah's neck, and Hannah squeezed her flat little body tight to her big soft breast.

'Can ye take it in, Lamby?'

'I guess so,' said Victoria, understanding the words, but not their portent. 'Does it mean that I will come over and live here with you?'

'God knows, little pixy. Maybe it'll be soon and maybe years.'

'When I do,' said Victoria, straining away from Hannah's embrace to look deep into her wrinkled old eyes, 'you needn't think you're going to be a servant any more. I'll be the beautiful prince and I'll free you from the wicked fairy — that's Aunt Sarah,' she whispered. 'And I will say, "Princess Hannah, thee may not work no more, but dwell

here in this beautiful palace with me, for ever and ever, amen!" Victoria threw back her head and laughed with delight at her fancy.

But Hannah did not laugh.

'Don't be silly, Lamby. This is no time for fairy tales. There'll be serious business afoot. And I want ye to tuck whut I've told ye away back in yer head, and pay no attention to it at-all. Keep yer eyes open and yer mouth shut. Mind now, whut Hannah's tellin' yer.'

Victoria sobered. After a few minutes, in which the old clock-keeper limped up and down his stairs several times, she said:

'What did Ernest mean when he said I didn't have any right to play in this attic, and that if he wanted to he could keep me from walking on Grandpa's stone wall?'

Hannah's faded eyes sparkled. 'And did the young gint say that?'

'Yes; and he said that some day he would have the whole say about everything. He'd try it now, but he knows I can lick him.'

'Oh, Lamby, I ought not to tell ye this, but little Ernest and his father and mother thought he was going to get the Big House.'

'And Uncle Matthew thought he was,' added Victoria simply. 'I've heard him and Aunt Harriet making plans for moving over. Isn't Uncle Matthew going to live in the Big House after Grandpa's dead?'

'I'm tellin' yer — no!'

'Then why does Aunt Harriet want Grandpa to die?'

Hannah shook her head. 'Don't ask me. How should I know about the like o' her? Yer mother's room, ye know which it is?'

'Yup.'

'Well, yer grandfather wants ye to have it.'

'I know it. He said I should have been kept there when I was a baby. He feels awful about it.'

'Well, remember it when he's gone. Don't forget, Lamby. The Big House is yours when yer grandfather dies. Keep yer eyes open and yer mouth shut. Now run along out, while I go up and rest me two feet.'

CHAPTER VIII

It was an established custom, dating back to the first Sabbath on the Hill, that Sunday dinners should constitute a family ceremonial at the Big House. While individually, with the exception of Victoria, his family gave Grandpa Price neither comfort nor joy, still he loved the idea of their gathering once a week around his long table to partake of the best the season afforded. He was their chieftain and it pleased him to feed his tribe.

Harriet was dressing for church, and Matthew reclined in the *chaise longue*, slippers and smoking-jacket pleading for exemption on account of the happenings of yesterday. He had sacrificed his Sunday morning doughnut as a preliminary argument.

'Your father has just sent word that dinner will be at one-thirty as usual,' said Harriet, watching Matthew in the mirror.

'I told you what my last words were to my father, and I stand firm.' Matthew crossed his slippers to emphasize his adamant position on that score.

'Matthew Price, I should think you were six instead of going on fifty.'

The tale of Matthew's haughty exit had been received with ridicule and had proved him even duller than his wife supposed. It was going to be difficult to maintain a dignified hostility when no

one took it seriously. He wished he'd kept still about the matter.

'Matthew, do you see what time it is? Do you honestly consider it quite wise to stay away from church this morning of all others? Do you want Bert and Flora to question you before Lena?'

'I'm not going to dinner, either.'

'And I insist that you are. Do you want Bert and Flora to know the reason why?'

'No.'

'Could you keep it from them, if they should start pumping? You are as open as a daisy, Matthew. You don't seem to realize that diplomacy — positive secrecy — is necessary to your position. Let this thing get out and you cut the most ridiculous figure in Hamlin — you, not Bertram. You seem to get such comfort out of the fact that Ernest has been left out. It's you who have been passed over for a ten-year-old scalawag. Ernest was supposed to be your heir, not his grandfather's.'

'It'll be all over town by to-morrow, anyway,' sighed Matthew with willful resignation.

'Who is going to tell if we don't?'

'Oh, I don't know. Who tells everything?'

'You do as I say, and it won't get out. Break with Grandpa and you are ruined. I'm going to see that you live in the Big House regardless of that will!'

'If you'll excuse me, Harriet, I fail to see how even you can engineer that.'

'In the first place, we've got to be pointedly nice to Victoria. Hannah is the greatest old

tattle-tale in the world. You give that child time enough and rope enough and she will cook her own goose. If we antagonize Grandpa now, he may do something more radical. I doubt if he dies right away. He's had a good scare, and he'll be careful. But let Victoria put him into a rage herself, and he'll change the will back. I never saw a man so mad in all my life as when she harvested all his seckel pears before they were ripe. Victoria is her own worst enemy.'

'But, Harriet, I thought you wanted her to get it. Are you going back to Ernest, after all?'

'My concern is for us, not Victoria. I say part of our diplomacy is to be nice to her — make of her.'

'Humn. You don't have to be a diplomat to be nice to her.'

'Matthew, sometimes I wonder if you realize what has happened. Don't you care? Have you no pride? Do you want Victoria to have it? Such altruism is new to you, and I don't understand it.'

'I tell you, I don't like schemes. I'm no diplomat.'

'I should say not! Will you kindly lay out your clothes, or shall I? As I said, we've got to win Victoria's confidence, her affection, if she has any. When Grandpa dies and the will comes out, as it must, of course, we'll simply announce that it was done with our approval and consent. Much can happen to prevent, even now. I've not given up hope, but in case the will stands, when Victoria takes possession of the Big House, you

and I move over too. The town will soon stop talking, and Grandpa's feelings toward you need never be known. Antagonize Grandpa and we are done for. Do you see?'

'Sounds plausible. What if Bert and Flora try to break the will?'

'You are the one to contest it, and if you are satisfied, and they get their regular income, they have no case. How can they contest a will made in favor of one grandchild, even if it does ignore another?' The thought of little Ernest's blasted future went far toward salving Harriet's wounds. Her inscrutable beady eyes snapped as she reviewed her scheme. 'And if you will be good enough to leave things to me, Matthew, and not complicate matters by trying to be original, you won't commit another blunder like this ridiculous feud with your father. Thank fortune you made him promise not to tell Victoria. I must give you credit for that.'

'You needn't,' Matthew sulked. 'Father had no intention of telling her. He doesn't want her to know.' He was in disgrace and he refused to be praised.

'And you'll go over to Sunday dinner as usual.'

'Under protest,' said Matthew, kicking off his slippers.

CHAPTER IX

GRANDPA came down to dinner in spite of the stern orders of the doctor and the fussy objections of Aunt Sarah. She wanted him to wait for Matthew and Bert, so he might make his first descent in seemly fashion on the arms of his sons. But Grandpa laughed harshly at this notion and commanded the shoulders of Lundstrom and Lena. Sarah hovered on the stair just behind them, directing, cautioning, and blowing excited bubbles through trembling lips. By the time he was lowered into the big chair by the library window, he was in no mood for company. Sarah left him alone.

There was no outward difference between this Sunday noon and others, but it seemed to Matthew, as they arrived with Bert and his family, as if he couldn't go through with it. They had walked up the street in dead silence. The secret joy of possessing vital information unshared by Bert and Flora did not stimulate Matthew as it did his wife. If he could have told the shocking news to his brother and then watched his reactions, perhaps that might have compensated for his own loss, but such secret pleasure was too subtle for his direct nature.

Matthew and Bert, in London gray cutaways and patent leathers, strutted in to greet their father. Both had been to church, and the knowledge of that irreproachable act rather than a sense

of beatification floated them into the difficult presence.

‘Glad to see you down, sir. You’re looking very fit, considering.’ Bert rubbed his smooth white hands together, and then extended one to his father, who gave him a few knobby fingers and a grunt.

Matthew moved his lips stiffly, but no sound came. He inclined his head and sagged into the nearest chair, allowing Bert’s greeting to suffice for both.

Grandpa must have understood, for he gave Matthew a cordial smile, and waved a courtly salute to Harriet and Flora who now appeared in the doorway. They had lingered before the mirror in the hall, Harriet to give the ‘boys’ time to see their father a second alone, and Flora because she had heard Grandpa’s scornful remarks about straying back locks. He had given them as his sole reason for his front pew in church. They set their faces in stereotyped lines of welcome and glided in.

Flora was propelling the reluctant Ernest from behind, as he stiffened his legs in a sudden fit of willfulness, and allowed himself to be shoved forward on his slippery new shoes by a firm hand against his shoulder blades. His mother gave him a final push.

‘Now run over and see Grandpa. Tell him how glad we are that he is down again — Ernest was so afraid you’d look sick, he didn’t want to come in,’ explained Flora, her eyes anxiously beseeching her son to be mannerly. ‘Shake hands nicely, dear.’

‘How do you do, sir.’

‘Where’s Victoria?’ demanded Grandpa, looking past Ernest at Harriet.

‘Oh, she ran out to the kitchen. She had a card or a map or something for Hannah, which she colored in Sunday School.’

‘I brought mine to you, Grandpa,’ announced Ernest in a high sing-song voice, bespeaking piety. He was searching through unfamiliar pockets in his new blue serge. Grandpa received a crumpled sketch of Judea with a nod.

Then Victoria, in pale yellow silk and bronze slippers and socks, flew in from the dining-room and darted into Grandpa’s arms. He tried to hold her prisoner after her brief embrace, but she wriggled to escape. ‘I’ve seen the dessert, Ernest, and you can never guess!’ She hopped up and down in the circle of Grandpa’s arms, and Ernest started toward the kitchen.

‘Come back here, young man! Wait till you are called!’ Grandpa’s voice had lost none of its sharp authority, and Ernest’s under lip quivered.

Flora drew him to her side on the sofa, and by way of consolation, ran her finger around under his stiff Eton collar, and tucked in the ends of his plaid tie. Ernest was deep in sulks and she was afraid he would refuse to eat. That was a sin unpardonable by Grandpa, and she and Bert exchanged looks which said that it was always Victoria who managed to set Grandpa against Ernest.

Matthew’s heart was beating wildly. In a mo-

ment he must make a daring decision. Of course Grandpa couldn't carve at dinner. Would he ask his eldest son to sit in his place as he always had under the circumstances? Matthew well remembered the first time his father had asked him to officiate. It had filled him with unutterable happy pride. He had been the heir apparent sampling the throne. And how it had stung old Bert to see him sitting at the head of the table, politely dispensing second joints, and granting petitions for slices of breast. He and Bert had nearly come to blows after dinner because Matthew had stated that, whatever happened, Bert could never preside at that table.

Now if Grandpa should offer him the empty honor to-day, and he should refuse, then Bert would be asked to serve, and the schoolboy prophecy prove false. No, that would be a bad omen. To accept would be humiliating, but to refuse might come under Harriet's list of overt acts, and certainly would be rated as undiplomatic. Matthew saw his life ahead as one humiliation after another.

But Grandpa was too skilled an antagonist to unguard so openly. He took his own place at the end of the long black walnut table. At the other end, screened from his view by a tall silver basket of carnations, sat Sarah. Above her head, on the dark oak paneling, hung a large portrait of the Honorable James Price, first lord of the Big House. The artist had perpetuated the gleam of his bright blue eyes in two sharp points of high light, and his ruddy cheeks set off by the pointed collar

made a striking contrast to the bloodless face of his daughter below him.

Grandpa Price glanced up and caught the look of patriarchal benevolence in his father's kindly face. 'I am sorry it has not been our family custom to say grace,' said Grandpa solemnly, laying down his soup spoon. 'I am very thankful to see you all at my table again, and I —'

'Papa, isn't a mansion bigger than a house?' Ernest's shrill voice sliced in on his grandfather's rumbling note.

'Grandpa was talking, Ernest! I guess you thought he had finished.' Flora tucked the stiff napkin between Ernest's stemlike neck and a large brass collar button. Then she glanced anxiously at Grandpa, but he was eating his soup.

'Why, yes, Ernest, a mansion is considerably larger and finer than a house,' Bert answered as if nothing had happened. He always felt importantly paternal when answering his son's interminable questions with patient exactness. He liked Grandpa to see him in this attitude, and it fed an ignoble vanity to have Matthew and Harriet listen to the intellectual contact between father and son. He sent Ernest an encouraging smile, and hoped the child was going to say something cute.

'Well, I told teacher so,' piped Ernest, gathering heart. 'She said, "In my Father's house are many mansions," and I said they couldn't be!'

Bert and Flora led in the laughter that followed. Matthew and Harriet could but join in. It was rather a neat turn for little Ernest, and Matthew

regretted that it had not been said by Victoria. But that young lady had taken advantage of the discussion to crumble her buttered bread stick into her soup with both hands.

‘And what did the teacher say?’ prodded Flora, who felt that Sunday dinner conversation should belong to the children as well as the grown-ups.

‘Oh, I dunno.’

‘She told him not to interrupt,’ said Victoria, without looking up from her congenial task.

‘Grandpa will excuse you while you go out in the butler’s pantry and wash your hands.’ Harriet was more or less pleased by Victoria’s remark, but she had seen the look of disgust which her buttery fingers had drawn from Flora.

Ernest stuck out his tongue, discreetly shielded behind his napkin, as Victoria unnecessarily jogged his elbow in passing. Grandpa glowered unpleasantly. He considered discipline at the table very bad form.

‘Go on, dear,’ said Flora, bound that her son should have his say.

‘I told her that even great big mansions didn’t have little houses in them. And she said what was a mansion, and I told her that my grandfather’s Big House was the only mansion in this town!’

Bert looked triumphantly at Grandpa.

‘I think you have proved yourself quite a modern theologian — seizing upon the letter of the text and ignoring the spirit,’ Grandpa answered, addressing the astonished Ernest. ‘A bit young for the higher criticism, Bert, but indicating an

argumentative turn of mind.' Grandpa smiled to himself, and for the life of him, Bert didn't know whether to feel complimented or angry. His father grew more impossible every day.

'What are you going to do when you grow up, young man? Ever thought?' Now that poor little Ernest had forced himself into the conversation Grandpa seemed disinclined to let him retire.

Gad, the old man is cruel, thought Matthew, who found the conversation painfully two-edged. Harriet could hardly restrain a smile which teased her thin lips, and her eyes smarted with inhibited sparkle at Bert's confusion.

Ernest was embarrassed by the pointedness of Grandpa's attention and the air of unusual expectancy with which the others awaited his answer. His pale eyes stared helplessly at his father for inspiration.

'I'm going to be a — a —'

'He's going to be a soldier. Aren't you, Ernest?' Victoria prompted, slipping into her seat. She had heard the cold questioning voice through the open door, and with her quick woman wit had sensed Ernest's stage fright. Having awe for no one, she lent him her fearless spirit.

Ernest nodded, refusing to meet his grandfather's burning gaze. He was too young to understand what had unmanned him so, but his father and uncle knew that the big nose was sneering.

'Humph!' growled Grandpa, as Lena passed him a huge silver platter.

Matthew heaved a sigh of relief. The ducks had been carved in the kitchen.

After dinner the family separated. Grandpa had again refused to be supported by his sons, and they had departed stiffly. Bert declined Matthew's formal invitation to come in and smoke a cigar with him, and Flora refused to consider Victoria's plea for Ernest to stay and play with her.

Of course what happened was not worth mentioning, but Bert and Flora had felt something hostile in the atmosphere of the Big House. They wanted to be alone.

CHAPTER X

GRANDPA PRICE weathered one 'last attack' after another, and as the years brought no eventful change, the family came to accept the permanency of things as they were. Matthew nursed a secret hope that the will had been shifted back again, although he had no grounds for such a rosy dream. He hated worry, and the altered will presented so many disagreeable possibilities that it was easier to rest upon a comfortable fancy than to face an unpleasant truth.

It made no difference in his present life. It might never have happened, and sometimes he wondered if it really had.

But Harriet never forgot the 'situation,' as she always named the conditions surrounding their altered prospects. Being nice to Victoria had been adopted as a plank in her platform, and it had been a precarious one to walk.

At first, when Victoria realized that the family had a different policy toward her, and she was dragged into uncomfortable prominence, not for public disgrace as before, but for display, such gross insincerity in grown-ups planted early seeds of distrust in an already warlike breast. She was tempted to declare her hand more than once, but always Hannah's admonition would check her, and she had kept her eyes open and her mouth shut. The family never guessed what she thought of her sudden popularity, nor of anything else.

Had it not been for Hannah's warm affection, her Irish sense of humor, which Victoria acquired from long association, her good common sense and true wisdom, the soul of Victoria might have been blighted. It was an early lesson in the world's hypocrisy, but when taken with laughter and not tears, it was a lesson better learned young than old.

Before the new will, Victoria was more at home with her uncle's servants than with her relatives. She actually felt strange and shy in the master's rooms of the Big House. Their somber elegance frightened her. When she and Ernest would steal up to the ballroom on the third floor, and peek at the dainty gold-leaf chairs under spectral slip covers of dingy white cotton, or, which was even naughtier, when they played hoisting sails with the slender cords which regulated the gold-silk window-shades, it was an act of lawlessness, not legitimate investigation into family preserves.

Even after Victoria shared Hannah's secret, the Big House was scarcely less remote from her own life. It was her mother's room which she and Hannah planned about in whispered kitchen conferences.

Matthew and Harriet had survived the so-called difficult age of Victoria, but their ward had passed through period after period which the word 'difficult' would hardly describe. Her adolescence had slipped by, or rather she had slipped by it, with none of the stereotyped manifestations anticipated by her aunt.

Primed with Freud and Brill, Flora and Harriet

studied young Ernest and Victoria as they developed unmistakable evidences of approaching maturity. They analyzed their sensitive *gaucherie*, and whispered surmises as to the probable reactions of the children toward each other. A beetle on a pin enjoyed more privacy of gesture than the young Price generation at this delicate time of life.

Contrary to the theories of the watching elders, neither Victoria nor Ernest showed the slightest sentimental interest in the other. They played amicably when the families were thrown together, and when they found themselves alone, they indulged in fierce and often bloody battles as of old.

Victoria at eighteen was a smashing beauty, as Uncle Matthew declared in an unguarded moment. He was still no diplomat, and his inhibited weakness for Victoria betrayed him more than once. Harriet suggested a slight modification of his extravagant appraisal, and admitted that Victoria was a very presentable girl, considering —

Grandpa found her delightful and fascinating through all her changing tenses. He remembered her past with a whimsical twitch in the corners of his big mouth. Her present was his only source of interest, and her future — ah, her future only he could fully picture. Her future was his only solace for having lived so long. There is no humor in life after you have outstayed the limit set by crowding heirs, and he must revel in a posthumous joke.

He wished that Victoria had a trace of his little

Emily about her, but she was 'all Vennard.' None of them had ever seen a Vennard, but Victoria's slender height, her olive skin, and long hazel eyes, starred with curling black lashes, were unknown markings in her mother's family.

The Price clan had evolved a fairly stable type, with strong variations, which were also pretty well standardized. Prices either looked like Grandpa — big nose, huge bony formation, and deep-set eyes, or like Matthew and Bertram — smaller Roman noses, prominent eyes, medium height, and thicker structure. They were always fair. 'Good Anglo-Saxon breed,' declared Grandpa, with a wistful eye on Victoria's slim brown hand.

Ernest showed rather an unfortunate crossing with the Dayton strain. He had inherited his father's pale, staring eyes and sandy coloring, but not his physique; his mother's small, fine features and delicate modeling, but not her alert temperament. Poor little Ernest.

Victoria's education had been dictated by Grandpa, her legal guardian. At his insistence, and in the face of concerted family opposition, she had been sent to the Hamlin High School, after outgrowing Miss Amanda Peters's small home classes for girls. Her childhood education had been gleaned from all the faded spinster culture in town: music with Miss Josephine Clark, who had studied in Vienna, and who had come back, not a great artist, as was fondly hoped, but the music teacher of her friends' children. There was French twice a week with dear Miss Salina Grace on the other side. Miss Salina lived all

alone, except for a crazy sister who was confined in the big front room over the parlor, and as Victoria stumbled through her conjugations, she sometimes heard weird wailing above. It added the thrill of unwholesome mystery to French. Drawing was dispensed by Miss Sally Crowninshield, pedigreed descendant of the Boston Crowninshields. She also conducted the young ladies of the Hill on bird walks and nature studies. Grandpa had contempt for such home-made education, but it was the best to be had.

With Victoria's doubtful heritage on her father's side, and her mother's tendency toward shallowness, Harriet considered it a dangerous experiment to expose the child to the heterogeneous influence of public school. She proposed a compromise — two years at the High School, in which time she could do as Grandpa wished, get to know her own townspeople, including girls on the other side. She need not go with them. Then two years at Miss Windsor's to smooth off the rough edges before college. For Grandpa had held his own again on the college question, and it was more of a feat to direct the movements of a family from a wheel chair than from the ramparts of the Big House. Harriet and Flora, now somewhat drawn together by the external mutualness of their problems, contended that college was an excellent social and intellectual training for a man. Ernest was sent to Harvard by unanimous vote, or rather by no vote at all. It was fore-ordained. Both his father and grandfather were Harvard men, and his uncles on both sides.

Grandpa Price had rowed on the Harvard crew. Ernest found an old photograph in the attic of the Big House. It was a shiny print of an old-fashioned group, faded and stained, but there was Grandpa in the center, with a softly curling mustache, tight flannels, and a small straw hat. Ernest had recognized him by the big twisted nose, and had slipped the picture into his pocket, that the wall of his room at Cambridge might be enhanced by a touch of family glory.

But college for a woman, especially one of Victoria's unconventionality, certainly planted queer ideas, without bestowing any compensating value. It was well enough for middle-class girls who were going to be teachers. What with every Tom, Dick, and Harry in Hamlin sending daughters to colleges and State universities, the distinction of being college-bred had ceased to be a distinction, in Harriet's opinion.

But Victoria was told by Grandpa that if the Jew girls down on Hancock Street could graduate from High School, she could stay right there till she did likewise. He had got the appropriation for that building in the belief that he still lived in a democracy. Ernest was no concern of his. Let him go to boarding-school, and further.

It meant a general average of over eighty won in keen competition with shrewd little Jews and Syrians to be able to pass from High School into college without a year of prep school, but Victoria did it. After Uncle Matthew and Aunt Harriet had settled upon Smith as the most desirable college, because she could come home without touch-

ing New York, and Ernest could run up to Northampton for her dances, thereby extending the family chaperonage, Victoria announced that she would go to Vassar, and of course Grandpa consented. The most important thing about that was that dear Hannah had lived to see her elected president of the freshman class.

It was during Christmas vacation of her sophomore year that Victoria exhibited the first queer idea, directly traceable to college life. Aunt Harriet had insisted that she be given a 'coming-out party' in honor of her majority, and Victoria had flatly refused. First because Hannah had just died, and a party in the Big House with no Hannah was more than she could bear. Her second reason was even less explicable to the family. She simply didn't believe in it.

'Come out?' she scoffed. 'Whence should I emerge, and whither goest I after having come forth?'

After Harriet's exhaustive protest, Victoria explained her position.

'In the first place, I am eighteen, am I not?'

'Barely,' admitted Aunt Harriet.

'And according to the law and the prophets I am both legally and financially independent,' she continued in her 'college voice' which irritated her aunt almost beyond endurance. Harriet thought Grandpa had proved his senility by settling a comfortable little sum upon Victoria on her eighteenth birthday. Bertram had heard of it, and ventured to object on the grounds of the dangers of independence to girls of the new gen-

eration. Grandpa had gentled of late, and, instead of a storm of rage at the interference, had patiently explained that it was a little memorial to Emily. Bertram was fearfully cut on Ernest's account.

'So,' Victoria added lazily, 'being presented at the court of Hamlin strikes us as an anticlimax.'

'How long do you think you could live on your income, according to your standards?'

'Would you care to have me try it?' asked Victoria in a really disagreeable tone.

'I think, my dear, that if you should make that experiment, you might appreciate what your uncle and I do for you.'

'A great many families are brought up very nicely on what we spend on an automobile,' remarked Victoria.

'Socialism,' hissed Aunt Harriet. 'The point is, my dear, I think it is your grandfather's wish.' That was always Aunt Harriet's last argument, and it often carried weight.

'Then it is the wish of a precious old darling, who has allowed himself to be overpersuaded, and I shall grieve to blast it. However, I think my reasons are sufficiently sound to appeal to his remarkably logical brain. The first is enough. Hannah is my real reason.'

'But of all the —'

'I'd rather not talk about Hannah, please, Aunt Harriet.'

'I should like to say just this,' Harriet insisted. 'Kindly remember what Hamlin thought of your

actions one short week after the death of your Aunt Sarah. I shall never forget it.'

'Going to the movies was a wake compared to what I'd like to have done on that joyous occasion. Had I truly obeyed the impulse of my larger nature, I'd have danced a bacchanal on the front lawn.'

Aunt Harriet shuddered. She was very much vexed with Sarah for allowing her small estate to revert to Grandpa. She had never shown one spark of interest in any one but herself, but decency had required a formal mourning period and the purchase of a black China silk waist. When Victoria's blatant disregard of the proprieties had been reported to Grandpa, he had laughed and said that at least one person in Hamlin had the courage of her convictions.

'Your other reason, then, is ridiculous,' she declared. 'Ridiculous, my dear,' she added, as Victoria's eyes grew cold and unfriendly. The old baffling secret look came over her face, and Harriet could feel her withdrawing miles into herself.

She smiled slowly and inwardly.

'Odd how one's sense of the ridiculous changes,' Victoria drawled, nonchalantly raising one long slender leg, and planting her heel on the edge of the table. She was in her own room, so Aunt Harriet did not notice it by so much as a glance at the unladylike angle. 'My coming out would be ridiculous. It would be a scream. But, on the other hand, my not coming out is a scream to you. Voilà!'

'I think as your grandfather's ward, some consideration for his feelings —'

'Oh, rot! Now, Aunt Harriet, you know just what a whirl Grandpa would have at a dance — sitting in his wheel chair, while over his devoted head the young feet of Hamlin shake the daylight out of the plastering. I guess we can persuade him to bring me out less actively. If not, I'll be like Topsy — I warn't never brunged out!' After a moment Victoria added innocently, 'We'll give a dance in the ballroom some day, if that's what you want.'

Her aunt started, and screwed up her eyes in sudden alarm. Several times in the past eight years Victoria had said something which seemed to Harriet or to Matthew as if she knew. But then she would be so disarming and naïve that Uncle Matthew would put it down to innocence, and Aunt Harriet to natural arrogance and bad taste.

'I hope there will be many parties in your grandfather's house now that you have such a charming younger set on the Hill. But I am intensely disappointed that you have adopted such a queer attitude, Victoria. I came out. Your mother came out. Your poor Aunt Sarah came out in that very ballroom. It was one of the finest parties ever given on the Hill. I wish she could have lived to see you children dancing in the Big House.'

'As I recall Aunt Sarah, she didn't impress me as an ardent devotee of Terpsichore,' Victoria remarked, smiling. Then she suddenly swung

her offending limb to the floor. 'All right, Aunt Harriet, we'll compromise. I'll have a coming-out party if you'll let me edit the list. That is, if you'll ask every one I know in town, all the kids I knew at High School, and make it a regular Christmas fête, with candles and carols and a walloping punch. It would be what Hannah would like. We'll ask the youngsters in for eats and then the old folks can dance until morning, including the recent débutante herself. How does that strike you?'

'As if you had better entertain in the Grange Hall,' said Aunt Harriet and left the room.

CHAPTER XI

THE Christmas début was never referred to again, partly because Victoria considered the case to have been settled out of court, and partly because there was very disquieting news from the office.

'James A. Price and Son — Lumber,' had not shared in the boom which followed the war. They were rather proud of it than otherwise, and when get-rich-quick upstarts made their appearance in Hamlin, the Prices would say to each other with great unction that there were no profiteers in their family. Churchill Street never questioned the rightness of Churchill Street, so the dignified boast went unchallenged.

In the old days the lumber business included owning mills along the river, as well as standing timber in the provinces and fractional interests in Northern Maine, and a very substantial proportion of the Price revenue came from their planks and dimension lumber sawed on the river-bank.

Then an insidious parasite industry crept in the wake of bygone ships and seemed to thrive on the death of the historic trade. Some of the old families abandoned their mills to the inevitable fate of fire, and there they stand, a mass of charred and rusty wreckage, grim companions to the vessels' rotting bones — pitiful gravestones for the days before yesterday. Deserters of the saw-mills went into pulpwood, and were regarded with scorn by those who did not dream that the

last long log had come over the dam, and Hamlin's day of glory was done. Cut lumber from Portland, Oregon, was being laid down in New York at less cost than Northern Maine could furnish it, and the war with the freight rates was on.

The Prices were among these who scorned wood pulp, and the result was that they were having a taste of hard times. It was like the first nip of frost to a tropical plant.

Grandpa Price was growing weary of life, and the zest for active participation in business had faded away in the five years since he had stepped foot in his office. Seth Lawton, the last of the old guard, had died the spring before, and there was no one to take his place.

Silsby, the manager, automatically assumed command, and although personally he was not agreeable to his employer, there was no objection to his gradual insinuation into family affairs. Miss Sullivan, who had been Grandpa's confidential clerk, found her duties less confidential under Silsby. She resented the new arrangement, but held her peace.

At Silsby's suggestion, Grandpa invited Matthew and Bertram to an informal conference in his room. It was rotten taste, whispered Bertram to Matthew, to have your household budget pawed over by a social inferior and an old maid Irish clerk.

'Damned awkward,' whispered Matthew, as his own garage bill came up for dissection.

The verdict was retrenchment by all hands — radical retrenchment.

'That don't mean cutting down to four cigars a day, boys,' laughed Grandpa a little shakily. 'It means altering your plan of life. It means giving up your chauffeurs, for one thing, and it may mean giving up your cars. It means that Ernest — Miss Sullivan, will you kindly turn to Ernest's account for last semester?'

Bertram scowled. 'I don't see any need to go into that, Father. I'll take it up with Ernest. He'd be the first to coöperate — to sacrifice for the sake of the family.'

Miss Sullivan laid a memorandum on the table.

'Item,' said Grandpa, reading at arm's length. 'Shoes made by Dack of Montreal, \$200 — bill sent to Cambridge — forwarded to the office.'

'I guess that must have covered the year, not the semester,' said Bertram stiffly.

'Quite true, my son. It may have to cover next year, also. I realize that the fiscal year is not chopped up into school vacations. I merely referred to last semester to indicate that the debauch of shoe leather had followed Miss Sullivan's note of the previous semester, suggesting that he haul in a bit. His desire to coöperate has not called itself to my attention.'

There was nothing like Bertram to whet his father's tongue for sarcasm, unless it was Matthew.

'When he understands, Father —'

'If he understands,' corrected Grandpa, 'he will look for a job next summer.'

'How about Victoria?' asked Bertram quietly. 'I don't see that you are dragging her into this.'

Why not compare her shoe bill with his? I suspect that her cigarette bill would just about balance his if the truth were known.'

Miss Sullivan looked up sharply and Grandpa winced. Then he turned to his wise old clerk.

'Miss Sullivan, will you be good enough to look up Victoria's account for last semester?'

'We haven't paid over anything to her for two months now.'

'You wrote her a note at the time you did Ernest?'

'Yes, sir, but she wasn't overdrawn. She said she'd let me know when she was strapped, Mr. Price.'

'You mean she doesn't get her allowance?' gasped Matthew.

Miss Sullivan nodded crisply.

'By George! And she sent me Corona-Coronas for my birthday!' Matthew grew very red and swallowed hard.

Grandpa twisted his nose in the direction of Bertram and said nothing.

'Er — what becomes of her allowance in that case?' asked Bertram. 'I suppose it is cumulative. It's a pity if a girl her age couldn't struggle along on what she has. I suppose she'll be drawing interest on her back pay next.' And Bertram bared the edge of his small white teeth in a mean smile at Matthew.

Miss Sullivan consulted her books. 'Mr. Ernest has drawn half of her allowance for the past two months till he could get caught up, and the rest she ordered turned over to Mr. Matthew's

account. She said something about the economic distribution of property.'

'Well, Bert, you've got Victoria all checked up — eh?' Matthew wiped his watering eyes with a flourish of a scented handkerchief.

'I don't see how she spends what she's got, anyway — a girl at college!' Bertram turned his pale stare upon Grandpa, who was elsewhere for the moment, his dreamy gaze far away beyond the mall.

The conference broke up with solemn promises of a general campaign of economy. Matthew went home inflated with a strange emotion. He had scored over Bert before Miss Sullivan. She had sided with him. Grandpa was pleased. Silsby hadn't said much, but he had felt Silsby on his side too. It had shown Grandpa just how he stood with Victoria, and he would think more of him on that account. If Harriet had only been there! That was a stroke for Victoria. Bully thing for her to do! Harriet couldn't help appreciating it. Carrying Ernest, was she? Well, young folks stuck together. But as for turning part of her own allowance over to her old uncle, that was a cat of another color. He didn't know how to tell Harriet without somehow giving her an opening to pester him. She always got so nasty if he stuck up for Victoria. He hoped Miss Sullivan would let it drop. No, he couldn't imagine Miss Sullivan letting anything drop. Well, maybe Bert would. No, that would bring up the subject of Ernest. Cuss the boy, anyway. Probably running a rig with some woman.

Matthew reported the conference to Harriet. She said nothing to the elaborate programme of self-denial which Matthew outlined, stimulated to unwonted enthusiasm by Victoria's generous act. She'd get a five-pound box of Page and Shaw's for that, and damned if he'd let Harriet know he sent it!

'What do you propose to do, Matthew?' came Harriet's thin voice, plumping itself like an acid lozenge in the midst of his chocolate reverie.

'Do?'

'Yes. Are you going to cut down, or just talk about it?'

'Now you hold on, Harriet. If you had been over there, you'd see that we've got to cut down. It isn't a matter of choice.'

'Cigars, for instance?'

'It may interest you to know, my dear, that father particularly stated that it did not mean cigars.'

'Oh, he did! Well, you must be standing in with Father again.'

'Shouldn't wonder,' said Matthew sheepishly.

'We should have sold Lafayette,' said Harriet. 'It's 54 this morning.'

'Humm. Father thinks perhaps we ought to — that I ought to drive the car myself.'

'So do I,' Harriet replied placidly. 'It would give you something to do.'

'But I mean, he says — he thinks maybe we ought to get along without Green for a while.'

Harriet shook her head. 'Things are pretty bad, aren't they? Would you come for me after

teas? That's the point. I know just what it would amount to. When it was time to take me to a bridge, you'd be having your nap. When I wanted to come home, you'd be finishing just one more rubber at the club. Oh, I can picture you taking Green's place!

'Think I'm trying to run for chauffeur? I said I might drive the car and I might not. Besides, what's to prevent your coming home in a taxi if I'm busy? That's what I'd like to know!'

CHAPTER XII

AT the time of Victoria's elevation to the top of Grandpa's list, an idea was born to Harriet. The idea was born of love, but it was a deep-seated love of the Lawrences, which had never been superseded by consideration for the Prices. Harriet's brother John had a son Hastings, named for his wife, the beautiful Dorothy Hastings, of Boston. By the union of Victoria and Hastings, Grandpa's property, although withheld from one branch of the Lawrences, would be diverted into the family coffers, and that would be the end of the Price supremacy on the Hill.

A little later, possibly, a similar idea occurred to Flora. Although she had no suspicion of Grandpa's intentions as to Victoria, she would not have been a thin-skinned mother had she not sensed that an alliance with the court favorite would strengthen her son's position with the head of the family. Victoria's personality was too powerful an agent to be allowed so wide a scope for action. So there was another be-nice-to-Victoria campaign which resembled but did not complement Harriet's original platform.

The possibility of civil war over Victoria was recognized by both sides, but it was never openly discussed. The skirmishes carried on by the elder generation were protected by supposed secrecy.

Hastings Lawrence started out with two signal

advantages. He was not a blood cousin, and he was a year older than Victoria. Nature had further endowed him with the qualifications of a champion in such a contest. He had inherited his mother's arrogant beauty, his father's brains, and possessed a lazy charm all his own.

Ernest was a scant half-inch taller than Victoria, a year behind her in college, and of a mental age which placed him outside Hastings's class. But his mother entered him in the lists at the earliest possible moment, and after the three young people grew up, the mothers had no need to whip on their favorites. The boys had no idea of the stakes they were playing for, other than the prize of immortal Helen.

Harriet did convey a veiled hint to her brother and his wife that a match between their son and her niece would be profitable to all. Dorothy Lawrence received the proposal with lofty indifference. The Hastingses were sought, not seeking, and up to that time Victoria had not recommended herself very highly as daughter-in-law to anybody.

The real contest began during the summer of Victoria's and Hastings's junior year. Hastings had a house party out at his camp at Crystal Lake, and invited several classmates from Harvard. Of course Ernest was invited too. There happened to be a number of girls 'from away' visiting in town, so the two boys had an opportunity to observe Victoria for the first time in the light of foreign competition.

It had not been their fault that she had not

shown herself at any of the Harvard functions. She had turned Harvard down for Princeton one year, and when pressed for reasons for further rejections, she had written that her idea of nothing to do was going to a dance with a cousin. But the boys suspected the true reason, a waspy-waisted West Point Cadet, whose patriotic duty kept him altogether too near Poughkeepsie. He had 'the drag' on all comers, and Ernest and Hastings were but prophets in their own home town. A semi-life-sized military photograph, framed in silver, offended the eye of Aunt Harriet during a whole vacation.

Out at the lake that week-end there was no one in sight but Victoria. The out-of-town men fairly gobbled her up, according to Ernest's peevish account of the affair to his mother. And all the other girls could do was to rush upstairs between dances to daub on more make-up. It was a walk-away for Victoria. Ernest's personal disappointment gave way to a stir of family pride. The fellows from away were paying tribute to his cousin, and he reveled in the vicarious triumph. After they had gone, he would give old Hastings a run for his money.

Things seemed to start after that. Ernest's mother gave a dance at the Bungalow, a privately owned but publicly utilized pavilion, which was the rage with the younger set just then. Ernest had wanted to give his dance in the ballroom of the Big House. It would have knocked the spots out of Hastings's rustic party, but Grandpa wasn't well enough to stand the noise and the

family thought it very unwise to risk the suggestion.

Victoria had the first dance with Ernest, after which they wandered out to look at the reflection on the stream. Ernest seated himself with his back to nature, and got out a cigarette with the desperation of a starving man. When it was evenly glowing, Victoria removed it from his mouth and set it at a saucy angle in her own.

'Thanks, Ernie, I believe I will indulge.'

'Good-night! I forgot! 'Scuse.' He hastily lit himself another and after several feverish drags, he exhaled with satisfied gusto. 'Nice party, if I do say it.' He moved over for Victoria to sit between him and the post.

'Great! I like Len Silsby a lot.'

'Typical Eli,' judged Ernest.

'Not he,' Victoria denied warmly.

'Well, he tried to cut in on our first dance, when he knew darn well I was giving this ball for you. Wasn't that Eli?'

'Fools crash in —?' asked Victoria tantalizingly, which meant nothing to Ernest, for he muttered, 'Didn't I tell you he was a fool?'

'Let me tell you something, Ernie,' said Victoria, laying a cousinly hand upon his knee. 'You must throw some pep into your line if you want to make a hit with Eleanor.'

'Who says I want to make a hit with Eleanor?'

'She does, for one, but we'll let that pass. Make it any one at all, then. Ergo, when the charming lady at your left shows signs of having

major in "Bartlett's Quotations," you should give her a quick follow-up. She cracks one about fools rushing in, for instance, hoping that, instead of stupidly posing as the angel in the case, you will rise and say that the angel is already treading the light fantastic—or words to that effect. *Comprenez-vous?*'

'Are you trying to baffle me, Victoria? Gee, you look pretty! I never noticed you had green eyes before.'

'I have not. You should say hazel.'

'Well, hazel, then. It's all the same to me. I like 'em.'

'Why, Ernie Price, are you saying sweet nothings to the enemy of your childhood?'

'Seems funny that I ever could have punched such a pretty nose as that,' said Ernest, hitching a notch closer.

'I shall have to remind you that it was usually in self-defense.'

'I know, but, gee, you were an awful tom-boy, Vic. 'Member how we'd have tree-climbing contests? I'd be walking along way over on the other side, and I'd see a little scrap of paper pinned to a tree, and I'd know you'd been up it.'

'I guess I do. Remember my mark, a diamond made of my two Vs?'

'Yes. Gee, Vic, you were a great kid!'

'You didn't use to think so.'

'Well, I do now.' Ernest put his arm back of Victoria and grasped the slender pillar. 'I'll bet I'll do something now I wouldn't have done then!' said Ernest in an excited whisper.

'Are you stumping me to jump off the railing? I always used to take dares.'

'Do you still take 'em?' demanded Ernest, leaning so close that Victoria could feel his heart pounding on her arm.

'You bet,' she answered, turning to look at his thin, flushed face.

'I want to kiss you, Victoria! I dare you!'

'Well, kiss me, silly.'

Ernest darted a swift kiss at her cheek, then suddenly stood up and took her roughly in his arms. 'Kiss me! You've got to!'

'Here, here! Play fair! Ernest! What do you think you are doing? Behave yourself!'

'But I dared you!'

'You kissed me, didn't you?'

'Well, I dare you to kiss me!'

'Oh, calm yourself, angel-face. We've sat out half a dance, and I've got it with Hasty.'

Ernest remembered that he had it with Eleanor, but he didn't care. He felt too queer and tremulous to brave the lights just then. When he thought of Victoria leaping from his arms, and running right into the arms of the handsome Hastings he burned with a terrible mixture of love and hate. He wanted to kill Hastings Lawrence.

Hastings was the most spectacular youth on the floor, tall, dark, and superbly graceful. The girls described him as absolutely classic. He was dancing with the stranded Eleanor when he saw Victoria standing in the doorway, and skillfully guided his partner to a stop near by.

'Now I have two girls,' he laughed easily. 'Lucky dog! What shall I do, ladies? Will you match for me?'

'The effete cave man,' Victoria flashed. 'He wants us to fight for him, Ellie, but he's too civilized to say so. Who's ditched you?'

'I — I think I had this with Ernest.'

'Oh — you wait.' Victoria dashed out on the porch and soon reappeared with her arm linked in Ernest's. 'The dumb-bell was star-gazing,' she explained, and pushed him over to Eleanor.

Then, with unspoken amusement, she and Hastings slid into step. They made a beautiful couple. Although unrelated, they were similar in slender height, olive coloring, and patrician features. Hastings's eyes were soft brown and Victoria's a changing gray and topaz. His hair was dark walnut and hers coal black. Their matched beauty and the harmony of their dancing drew every eye in the room.

Victoria had never thought about Hastings in any but the general acceptance of long association. He had been part of her childhood. Now he was part of her maturing life. Suddenly she became aware of him as a separate person. In contrast to Ernest he seemed old and sophisticated and, oh — European was the word she found to express him to herself. She knew that she was going to flirt with Hastings that night.

But Hastings was a wary youth, well versed in the ancient art. And he had seen the double silhouette on the piazza rail. He had no intention of crashing in at the zero hour, as he phrased it.

He would wait till she was jazzed up again, and then he would demonstrate the difference between a smooth system and the uncouth tactics of a poor little shrimp like Ernest.

By the time supper was over, Victoria was keyed to a high pitch of exhilaration. Every man present had made love to her but Hastings, and she had warded them off, impatient for what she knew would be the climax of the evening. Hastings was biding his time. She felt a strange and unwilling anticipation, and was angry with herself for it. She tried to be honest. She did not want Hastings to mean anything more than she did, but she wanted him to think he did — just for that one evening. That sort of thing was really over for her in the serious sense. The West Point affair had been a dismal fizzle. She was off men.

Toward the end of the evening Victoria found herself down on the shore with Hastings. She had cut the last two dances with Len Silsby for him, and they had fled the bungalow via the kitchen. They scrambled down a high bank of prickly juniper, and then slid through the thick growth of spruce, and jumped onto a narrow beach.

‘At last!’ said Hastings, as they stood looking back at the sheer wall of trees. ‘We’re alone, Vic! Just listen to the stillness! They belong to another world up there, don’t they? And we belong here — to-gether!’

‘Yes.’ Victoria’s heart was making so much noise in her ears that she couldn’t listen to the stillness.

'This is what I've been waiting for,' and Hastings took a deliberate step toward her. Victoria closed her eyes, and her lips melted into his.

'You — you mean it, dearest?' cried Hastings, steadying himself as Victoria strained away from him in breathless alarm.

'Oh, I don't know. I don't know.'

'But you wanted me to kiss you, Vic?'

'Yes, I suppose so, but not like that!'

He drew her to him again, and she let herself swim away on an uncharted sea.

'Oh, don't! Not any more, please. It makes me dizzy, Hasty. I can't think.'

'Neither can I. I love you! I swear I never loved a girl the way I do you. Tell me you love me, Vic!'

'Don't! Don't, Hasty — not any more. I can't stand it!'

But he kissed her again and again, until she yielded her limp body back into his arms. Then suddenly she burst into tears.

'I'm so tired, Hasty. Please take me home. I want to go home.'

'All right, darling, but don't cry. What's the matter? Was it the punch?'

'I don't know. Take me home.'

'Oh, Vic, I shall die if you don't say you love me! Please, dearest! — I didn't know what love was before. Oh, don't cry, darling. I'm awfully sorry. Tell me that you love me — just once and I'll take you home.'

'Yes, I do — I guess. It wasn't the punch. I'm just crying because I'm so tired.'

'Kiss me once more, and I'll take you home —'

They stumbled along a strip of pebbled beach for a quarter of a mile, before they could get a foothold on the overhanging bank. Then they scaled it by the strength of their arms, hauling themselves up by one tough root after another. Victoria refused to go inside the bungalow. Her shoes were ruined, her hair tangled, and her hands torn and bleeding.

Hastings got her wrap, threw an excuse at Ernest, and whirled her away in his car.

The next morning Ernest went over to Hastings's house. They had a date for tennis at ten, but Ernest carried no racket.

Hastings was having his breakfast. He had come down late so they were alone in the dining-room.

'Lo, Ernie,' grunted Hastings, glancing up from his strawberries on ice. 'Sit down. Have some food?'

'No, thanks. I've just come over to see if you want to explain why you took Victoria home last night.'

'Because she asked me to.'

'Oh, she did? Very queer, considering she went with me, and, under the circumstances, I naturally would be the one to take her home.' Ernest was very red. It was not easy, bearding the redoubtable Hasty in his own home, but he considered that he had been insulted, and he had his family back of him in that.

'I tell you how it was, Ernie. Sit down, won't you? You see, Vic and I suddenly discovered that

we were engaged, so under the circumstances, I naturally was the one to take her home. No hard feelings, old man. On the other hand, how about congrats? You're the first to know.'

'You — and — Vic — engaged? Why — she — why — I don't believe it!'

'Ask her.'

'I will, by God! I — I can't believe it!'

'Am I so impossible as a fiancé?'

Suddenly a sharp look flashed across Ernest's pale, red-rimmed eyes. 'Ah-ha! I begin to see light! So that was why you loaded the punch?'

Hastings leapt to his feet and seized the big silver coffee-pot. Ernest ducked, but Hastings had just stopped in time. He heard his mother's step on the stairs.

'Quick!' he muttered, setting the coffee-pot down gingerly, his eye on the door. 'Apologize or I'll choke you. Quick! Mother's coming!'

'I do — I apologize,' whispered Ernest. He slipped out the French door just as the imposing figure of Dorothy Lawrence crossed the threshold from the hall.

Hastings carefully pulled out a chair for her as if he had risen for that purpose. He then drew a napkin across his smiling lips and kissed his mother. She sat down beside him, and clasped her beautiful white hands on the cloth.

'How is my boy this morning?' she inquired, moving a finger-bowl back and leaning closer to see if there were shadows beneath his somber eyes.

'Fine,' replied her son, returning a smile which

was exactly like her own — shining white teeth, a dimple in each cheek, and great sorrowful eyes. 'Victoria and I are engaged.'

'Hastings! You don't mean it! When? Last night?'

'Yes.'

'Have you told your father?'

'Haven't see him.'

'Well, my dear, I am very, very glad — for you. She — she loves you, does she?'

'Sure, she does.'

'And you think she will make you happy?'

'Oh, Mother!' He covered her hands with one of his, and then passed his cup for her to pour him more coffee.

'Then it is all settled — you and Victoria!'

'Oh, of course we shan't announce it till after Class Day. I haven't talked over the gory details with her yet, but I know how she feels about college engagements. They cramp your style. A fellow wants to be technically free his senior year. I don't know why, but there seems to be a prejudice in our bunch against engagements. Some do land with a hang-over from High School, but as a rule it isn't done. And Vic is a fan for freedom, if any one ever was.'

'But she has promised?'

'How old-fashioned, Mother! We haven't plighted our troth on bended knee or any little thing like that, but we're all set. Gee, I told her I'd give her a call when I got up. She'll be suing you for alienation of affection.'

It was not wisdom, but instinct which prompted

Hastings to say that. Some far-away male forbear was whispering to him out of the dark ages. A man possessed of and by two women has need of much wisdom.

CHAPTER XIII

HASTINGS was in the library when Victoria came down. She waved sleepily as she caught sight of him through the hall door.

‘Come on out while I eat,’ she called, ending her wave in a yawning stretch with both arms — the ultimate proof of bad breeding, thought Aunt Harriet as she stepped out with Hastings.

‘Good-morning, my dear. Hastings has told me.’ Harriet seemed on the verge of an embrace, but Victoria went into another violent yawn, and answered with a nod and a blank stare.

‘He has told me about your engagement, my dear, and I am very happy.’

‘Oh, that!’ Victoria sighed with evident relief.

Hastings rushed over to her with both hands outstretched, and he also seemed about to precipitate himself upon her in an exuberant greeting appropriate to the occasion, but her casual expression checked him.

‘For Heaven’s sake, look happy, sweetheart — even if you aren’t half awake. Aren’t we still engaged?’

Victoria smiled languidly at them both and kept on to the dining-room. ‘Being engaged before breakfast is more than I’m up to. Had yours, Hasty?’

‘Calling on my fiancée before breakfast would

be more than I could carry,' he laughed, taking a chair opposite her.

Aunt Harriet had dropped into her own place and touched the bell.

'I believe I'll have to take a half a cup of coffee with you two dear children.'

'Do,' said Victoria. 'Where's Uncle Matthew? Mind if I begin?' She took a smacking mouthful of grapefruit and winked at Hastings. 'Nothing like this for that fur-lined feeling — eh? How are you, anyway?'

'Right as a church,' replied Hastings, grinning at her blissfully.

'Your uncle is downtown. You must go right over and tell Grandpa as soon as you have finished your breakfast,' said Aunt Harriet, answering her careless question.

Victoria answered coolly: 'Since Hasty seems to have been gossiping, I suppose I'd better break it to Grandpa before the neighbors do. Why all the speed, anyway?'

'Well, I must say you can control your enthusiasm,' said Hastings with a bitter curl to his full lips.

'Wait till I get some black coffee,' she laughed.

'Aunt Harriet, witness my future wife on the morning after? Isn't she scintillating?'

'She takes life very casually, to say the least,' said Aunt Harriet, and Victoria knew she was displeased.

Hastings protested. 'I rushed over to tell Aunt Harriet the joyful news, and look at the frost you hand me.'

'Oh, don't be so touchy. I can't seem to realize it myself, that's all. I didn't know we were actually engaged to be married.'

'Well, for God's sake, what do people get engaged for, if not to marry?'

Aunt Harriet was tapping the cloth with a sharp polished forefinger-nail. 'She's just out of sorts, Hastings. 'Late hours night after night. Small wonder she has no nerves left. I didn't hear you come in last night, and your uncle says he didn't.'

'Hasty carried me upstairs and put me to bed, didn't you, darling?'

'Why, Victoria Vennard! I should think you would blush,' gasped Aunt Harriet. 'What a thing to say, even in fun! Just suppose one of the servants had overheard you. I can't imagine why you want to say such things!'

'To tease you, Aunt Harriet,' Hastings explained quickly, with a forced laugh. 'Don't you know her well enough yet?' He was ready to defend her, but Victoria could see a flush of displeasure on his face too.

Aunt Harriet addressed Victoria in a low voice full of repressed exasperation. She did not want the servants to hear. 'Hastings is sweet enough to make allowance for your overstrained nerves, but I should hate to have his mother or father hear the way you seem to evade the question of your engagement, as if it were a matter of small importance. I am frank to say that I am very much hurt — my dear. Hastings is like my own son. I suppose there isn't a girl in Hamlin who

wouldn't give her right hand to marry the man who has just honored you with his offer, so don't be too flippant. I want you to stop all this nonsense, dear. Are you engaged to Hastings, or are you not?'

'I'll bite,' said Victoria, and Aunt Harriet begged to be excused.

Victoria drank her coffee in silence, after which her spirits showed the promised rise.

'Don't look so sulky, my dear,' she said, mimicking Aunt Harriet's special 'my dear.' 'It gives me a foreboding chill, because we look like Uncle Matthew and Aunt Harriet having a chatty meal.'

Hastings smiled reluctantly, as Victoria deliberately sent him a shaft of dazzling light from her eyes into his.

'You can't resist razzing her, can you?'

'Nope.'

'But this morning, Vic! Gee, I woke up so happy and so proud, and I knew how tickled Aunt Harriet would be. It's been her dream for years, she says, just to live to see her two families united in another generation. She thinks you and I will have the handsomest children in the world, Vic.'

'Oh, Lord!'

'Well, you can laugh, but she kind of got me this morning. She's really awfully fond of you, if you'd give her a chance. She even got to talking about their baby that died, and how you'd taken its place.'

'The child was a moron, I believe,' said Victoria.

'Gad! You're as hard as nails. It scares me to know that under a heavenly looking exterior a woman can be so hard. Try to let yourself out more, Vic. I know what a marvelous girl you are, but — oh, Vic — I shall never forget last night if I live to be a thousand! That was the real you! I could feel your satiny lips against mine all night long. Gee, you were wonderful, dear. That's why this morning hurts so.'

'Yes, it was wonderful. Perhaps it was just one fleeting moment, and now it has gone on to eternity, and left us here.'

'But the moment was ours. It was us. It will come again whenever we do this.' Hastings rose and bent to kiss her, but she leaned far back in her chair and looked coldly into his eager face.

'Let it come back if it will, but don't try to force it, Hasty. Now let's go over and tell Grandpa.'

Hastings preferred to wait downstairs while Victoria went up to her grandfather's room. He hadn't moved from his wheel chair, except to be derricked onto the bed by Lena and the nurse, for over a year. Victoria hated to go into that room. She could hardly bear to see the giant Grandpa of her childhood shrunken into this thin, shaking old man. The big, hard, freckled hands, which used to capture her little brown paws in games of 'catch rabbit,' now lay white and heavy on his lap. His mouth was sunken; his neck hung in gaunt folds under a sharp overhanging jaw. Only the eyes retained their fire, and the big thin beak of a nose its expressive twist.

Victoria kissed his cold cheek, and sat on the bed close by. He greeted her with a smile, the very sweetness of which brought tears to her eyes, and then to his.

'Now what's wrong, Vixen? You look guilty. Aren't you old enough yet to keep out of trouble?'

Victoria put both arms around his neck and whispered in his ear: 'I think my troubles are about to begin. I am engaged to Hastings Lawrence. He's downstairs.'

Grandpa pushed her roughly away, and, with his hands still on her shoulders, searched her face with his deep old eyes.

'You and Hastings — eh? This is a surprise to me, little girl. I think you should have warned your old grandpa before you gave him a start like this. I'll have to think about it. You and Tom Lawrence's son — married — well! It couldn't have happened once.'

'Tom's grandson, dear,' said Victoria quietly. 'Ed was the villain, you know, but you and Hastings's grandfather made up ages ago.'

'Oh, yes, yes. You and little Jack Lawrence's boy. I haven't laid eyes on him for years.'

'Yes, you have, Grandpa. Excuse me, dear, but you've forgotten. Hasty came up to see you last year right after the Yale game. He'd met an old classmate of yours. Don't you remember? He sent you a message.' Victoria stooped to pick up the glasses case, which always kept slipping out of his lap.

'So he did. So he did. Handsome scamp, isn't he, but — but — go on — tell Grandpa all about

it. You love him, of course, and all that nonsense. Well, poor little Vixen, perhaps you do after all. Go on! What about it?' Grandpa's head was shaking with excitement.

'I'll try to tell you, dear. It just happened last night. He's waiting down there,' she whispered. 'He didn't want to come up till you sent for him.'

'Don't want him up. Some day, perhaps, but not now. Vixen, your mother loved your father enough to break our hearts, and then she loved you well enough to die for you. I want you to remember that, before you give your mother's baby to the first man who wants her. That's all. I want to think. Give me a tight squeeze — tighter — ah — that's the way you used to hug when I'd say, "How much do you love Grandpa?"'

Victoria buried her face down the collar of the blanket wrapper, and squeezed tighter and tighter. Grandpa muttered husky baby words into her hair, and patted her shoulder with a trembling hand.

'There, there, Grandpa didn't mean to make his baby cry. There, there. You run down now — and just hand me my Horace, will you, dear? I shall have to woo the past awhile. If the present displeases you, Baby, remember that there is quiet balm in antiquity. Run along.'

Victoria wiped her eyes and made a break for the door.

'Hold on, Vixen! I want you.'

She went back to him slowly. 'What is it, Grandpa?'

'Give my love to Hastings, and tell him he can

be engaged to you as long as he wants, but when he's ready to marry, let him come to me.'

Victoria found Uncle Matthew in the library treating Hastings to a cigar. He held out his arms, and she returned his resounding smack full force.

'You sly little fox!' he wheezed delightedly. 'Fooled us all, didn't you?' and then caught her in another boisterous embrace. 'What'd Grandpa say — huh? Was he pleased?'

'Well, not exactly, but, on the other hand, not on the war-path. I think you've got a chance to make good with Grandpa, Hasty.'

That young man raised his shapely brows and elaborately deposited a long ash on the tray. 'I'd be charmed. Very kind of him to give me something to strive for.'

CHAPTER XIV

VICTORIA sat on her uncle's stone wall, and stared across Churchill Street at the Lawrences' stone wall. She beat an idle tattoo with her heels on the rough granite base. Life was always just the same, and she saw no promise of variety on the familiar horizon.

College had been a lot of fun. She had learned more or less from her books and associates, but she was feeling the inevitable remorse over much wasted opportunity. It was the first summer after graduation, and she felt very cynical and very old.

The sadness of something gone forever crept over her. Youth was beginning to go. Age was approaching. One couldn't go back. If closing the door on something past had opened a vista of something fresh, life would not be so tragic, but there was nothing new, nothing different. Life in Hamlin after college was anti-climax. The cosmic ideas which she and her friends had exchanged so largely now became remote fancies, as detached from the present as the limits of eternity itself.

During her career at Vassar she had learned to believe that life is a plastic mass of potentiality, clay in the potter's hands, and each his own potter. But she had come home to a hard-baked vessel, and she felt herself shrinking back into it. She was the malleable hunk of mud, and life would mould her into the standard shape. She had but

to live in her plaster jar to fit it. Nobody understood her, but she understood everybody.

Hastings Lawrence appeared on his top step. His tall, graceful figure in blue coat and white flannels should have made a pleasing variation on any girl's horizon. But he was nothing new to Victoria. Hastings was no longer thrilling.

She watched him as he emerged from his front door, trotted down his stone steps with a careless finger trailing over the brightly polished brass rail. He stepped over the door and under the wheel of his new roadster and jerked into gear.

Down to the corner, up the other side of the mall he sped as if pursued, and then came to a sliding stop before Victoria.

'Modern imitation of a hen crossing the road,' she drawled, provokingly impersonal.

'Coming?' he replied, leaning over to throw open the door.

'Where?'

'Oh, any old place. Out to the club. Come on, name your speed.'

Victoria let herself down from the wall with the affected agility of rheumatism and ambled to the curb. She sighed as she sank into the deep red cushion and slammed the door.

'I darn near stripped my gears getting started, because I could feel your sarcastic eye upon me,' complained Hastings as they got under way.

'I've got a right to be critical,' laughed Victoria. 'Ain't I a regular chauffeur?'

Hastings grinned. He cared for nothing on

earth now that he had Victoria tucked close to his side.

'If Uncle Matthew wants to go out to the club, I suppose he can go with your father,' mused Victoria. She felt anxious now that she had slipped away without notifying the family.

At her demand to be given something useful to do, Uncle Matthew had appointed her his jitney driver. Green had gone long ago, and the old Packard limousine had been replaced recently with a cheap sedan, owned and operated by Victoria. She called it 'the bus,' and had been very faithful to her job. Aunt Harriet had no cause to complain, as she added a prompt fourth to the regular games for small stakes, and Uncle Matthew's trips to the links with his charming new driver were the envy of the club.

'I'm going to get a real job in the fall,' announced Victoria, following up an old train of thought.

Hastings stole a glance at her complacent profile.

'Not as a real chauffeur!'

'Course not. I don't know yet, but I've had one or two good offers. If the family would only see things my way for once in their lives!'

'How about me?'

'What do you mean?'

'Why, I should think it might occur to you to wonder how I would take it.'

'I haven't lived opposite you all these years without knowing beforehand just how you'll react to any given stimulus or stimuli.'

'Oh, Blah! Listen to me. This job idea doesn't go. Savvy? I don't stand for it at all.'

'Zo?'

'And I should think by this time you'd know the reason.' Hastings emphasized his disapproval by standing on the gas.

'Better not hit it up till she's more used to you,' advised Uncle Matthew's chauffeur.

'You make me tired,' said Hastings, obediently slowing down to thirty-five. 'Any one would think you were some chicken off the flats the way you act. Honestly, it gets my goat!'

'Having isolated the alter ego of your dual personality by belling the goat, what course shall I take?'

'If that's the way they talk at Vassar, I advise you to take a course at the University of North Dakota!'

'I mean,' explained Victoria patiently, 'what do you want me to do?'

'Why, nothing. That is, nothing but marry me.'

'Well, you are modest, Hasty.'

'You know what I mean. Can't you be happy for a year, say, just sticking around? I am.'

'Yes, I observe.'

Hastings flushed. 'Honestly, every time I go out to sit on the porch I have a feeling that you think I ought to be cutting the lawn.'

'I was thinking about that in a way, when you were driving a half a block instead of walking over the mall. I thought to myself, the only thing that would make that lazy thing cross over the mall would be a keep-off-the-grass sign.'

'You certainly are a comfort! After four years of steady grind at college, you actually begrudge me a few months' vacation before getting into harness for life. God!'

'I was estimating the cost in gas, depreciation, wear and tear on gears —'

'Oh, cut it —'

'Nervous energy, and time, which you consumed in order to —'

'Come up on the right side of the street, so my haughty lady wouldn't have to climb over my lap,' finished Hastings, half appeased because Victoria was smiling.

'Or walk around the car,' supplemented Victoria. 'You see, even that alternative does not occur to your atrophied sense of independent locomotion.'

'But I came for you to go to ride.'

'You did not. You are just killing time, same as I am.'

'You flatter me, Miss Vennard.'

'Yes, perhaps I do. The truth about us all would be brutal. We aren't worth our salt.'

'Because we don't earn it?'

'Yes. I wish you had gone in for something, Hasty — engineering, medicine — anything.'

'I consider my father's business respectable,' said Hastings stiffly.

'Too respectable — too safe. It doesn't amount to anything.'

'Quite as much as James A. Price and Son, I guess.'

'I agree with you. James A. Price and Son is

history. We're just parasites living on the dead. Even dear old Hamlin lives on her past.'

'You have the darnedest ideas,' Hastings said shortly.

'I know it. They keep me from being happy.'

'Chuck 'em.'

'I can't. They are beginning to mean something to me.'

'Why bother with ideas after graduation?' he laughed. 'I'm happy. Life looks good to me.'

'Does it, really?' Victoria turned puzzled eyes upon his tranquil face, and he flashed her a quick smile. Yes, he was happy, she concluded.

'Tell you what, Vic, you don't know when you're well off. That's the trouble with people like you. Now suppose I had to take a dumb job like a plumber's helper, and wait years to earn enough to get married on, would you be happier? No. You'd wish you had a little pull so you could get me a nice soft job in Mr. Lawrence's office.'

'No, I'd never wish for a soft job for you, Hasty. I'd be afraid.'

'Afraid? Do you mean you'd like to be the difficult princess to please, and would send your suitors on impossible quests? Are you as romantic as that, Vic?'

'Not romantic — pessimistic. Look at Uncle Matthew.'

'Oh, well.'

'The difference is only in degree. He didn't even bother to occupy a chair in his father's office. He could have.'

'The implication is quite unjustified. Would it

surprise you if I told you that I dislike your attitude about things as much as you seem to disapprove of mine?’

‘What things?’

‘Don’t pretend to be literal. Things in general — life, and your duty toward people. Mother was saying the other day that she didn’t understand how you could maintain your attitude of destructive criticism, and live here in Hamlin. Even if you don’t say anything, it’s always in the air when you’re around. It isn’t restful, and it isn’t exactly pleasing to older people.’

‘I’m sorry your mother objects.’

‘I didn’t say she objected. Can’t you get the English language straight? I said she didn’t understand, and neither do I.’

‘People like you and your mother, always object to what they do not understand. *À comprendre c’est à pardonner.*’

‘Piffle! I hate to say this, Vic, but really your superiority complex doesn’t set very well with my mother. There’s no use mincing matters. I do think that some consideration for her, not as my mother at all, but because she stands for what she does in this town, and because — oh, hang it — everybody looks up to Mother but you, and you are going to be her daughter-in-law. Don’t you see how hard it is for me, dear?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m not finding fault, Vic, but I want to help you. Sometimes it seems to me that you go out of your way to antagonize Mother and Aunt Harriet. What’s the good, anyway?’

'None,' said Victoria gravely. 'Nothing is any good.'

'That's foolish. You know why you do it, and so do I. You don't like them, and I think it's pretty poor policy to show it quite so plainly.'

'Policy? How-come?'

'Yes, policy. I came over on purpose to talk to you about this. Mother and I were watching you from the front window. Just sitting there you were, kicking your heels, and sneering at our house. That's what it looked like, at any rate.'

'What's the harm in that?' asked Victoria darkly. 'My natural expression is one of polite derision. I'm getting to look like Grandpa.'

'Gosh! Listen to me, Vic. Mother said to me, "For pity's sake, go over and cheer up Victoria. She looks as if she hadn't a friend in the world." That's how she feels about you, Vic. She's ready to take you right into our family as her own daughter, if you'd only let her. I wish you wouldn't be so stand-offish with Mother. The way things are and everything, we'll probably have to live with them.'

'No, thanks,' said Victoria.

'Well, I'll be damned if you aren't a cool one! What do you expect me to do? Build you a bungalow in Spain, when I'm not even started yet? Gee, Vic, you're hopeless. I should think what your own family's going through would teach you a lesson. Everybody's wondering how long they can hang onto the Big House. I guess if Uncle Matthew had been willing to live with his father, they wouldn't be in quite such a hole.'

Victoria felt her heart turn to lead. The Big House in danger!

'Where did you get that about the Big House?' she asked coldly.

'Why — why, from Aunt Harriet, I guess. It's no news.'

'It's news to me,' said Victoria.

'I shouldn't think it would make any diff to you,' said Hastings, by way of consoling her, for Victoria looked inexplicably hurt. 'You'd never live there, anyway. By the time Uncle Matthew pulls out, you'll be living with me. What's the matter with our house, when it comes to houses? For the life of me I can't see why it isn't just about as good.'

'It isn't that,' mumbled Victoria. 'It shocked me, that's all. We — we love the Big House.'

'I'll say you do!' And then, with more sympathy: 'Please don't feel bad, Vic. You'll be all right. You've got your own money, and look at the tin I'm bound to get in the course of human events. Lucky for us I am the only child, things cost so like fun now. But we'll have a darn big house, even though the Town Hall does have to go under. Buck up, old girl! I say, long live the Lawrences!'

CHAPTER XV

THAT night an ominous thing happened. It was about one o'clock when everybody on the Hill woke up. The Methodist bell was clanging fire, and a far-away groan across the river echoed a doleful call for help.

Matthew and Harriet rushed to their front window and peered across at the Big House. It was safe — standing out in sharp relief against a lurid background, but blazing embers seemed to be falling on its roof. The old elms were stirring their tops uncomfortably, as if the blood-red sky scorched their tender twigs. In no time the mall was black with people. The engines were breathing heavily a few blocks away.

Then Victoria joined them. They snatched clothes and rushed out to mingle in the pressing mob.

It was Miss Crowninshield's beautiful white house, just three above Grandpa's.

A siren shrieked, and the crowd silently cut itself in two as the ambulance passed. A loud wail went up from a thousand throats. The firemen had got Miss Crowninshield out, but there was no need for the ambulance.

'Come on, Victoria. You'd better go home.' Uncle Matthew swung her back through the excited, pushing throng.

Victoria was trembling, so Uncle Matthew mixed her a hot drink and one for himself. He

hadn't got over that first fright that it was the Big House.

Half an hour later Aunt Harriet came back with her brother John. She was white and her lips quivered, but she sternly refused Matthew's eager suggestion of a restorative.

'You'd better go out with him, John,' she commanded. 'He probably wants an excuse for another bracer himself.'

They all sat around the dining-room table while the men stayed their jumping nerves. It was the most horrible tragedy in the history of Hamlin. After several panting starts, Harriet was able to tell them what she had gathered. In the first place, Hastings was up on their roof with a hose, and if the wind didn't change, nothing else would go. Ernest had got a gang of ruffians to go up on the Big House and keep things wet down. She had been with Grandpa for a few moments, but he had pointedly desired to be left alone. The Hale house on the leeward side was safe now, but it had got an awful scorching.

The fire department had been called by telephone from the house, before a neighbor had rung in the alarm. That was the mystery. It had started in Miss Crowninshield's bedroom, and she had been burned in her bed. Now the point was, if she had been asleep, who had sent in the alarm? Her door was locked on the inside, and the telephone was downstairs. She lived all alone in the house. The fire had eaten its way through the roof, but the lower floor was undamaged except by water. Then Harriet paused. They found the

black and mangled remnants of a kerosene can by the bed.

‘Just think of it! Poor Miss Crowninshield! Oh, dear, what a terrible thing to happen right on our street! To think that I used to go bird hunting with her, and so did you, Victoria. Oh, it doesn’t do any good now, but I wish I had gone to see her. Maybe she was sick!’

‘Now don’t take on so, Harriet,’ said her brother gruffly. ‘It’s been pretty tough on us all. It’s given the whole street a nasty shaking-up. Tell you one thing, Matthew, I’m going to stick on some more insurance first thing to-morrow. I don’t believe I’m half covered for that last batch of rugs.’

But Harriet couldn’t get over it. ‘You hear of such things happening, and you don’t take them in till they strike home. The Hales say she hasn’t been out of the house for months. She hasn’t been using the front part, just her room and the kitchen. Think of it, and we didn’t know! The Hales’ cook used to go over once in a while with fresh doughnuts and things like that, but she wouldn’t let any one in. From what Annie could see through the crack she would open, the place was a sight.’

Then John contributed his news. ‘Ned Taylor was saying that she must have been pretty well strapped. They’d had to refuse her any more loans at the bank, because they found out that she’d quarreled with all her family away from here. The house was mortgaged to the sky, you know, and she had borrowed the limit on the

mortgage. She'd probably got to the end of her rope and —'

'But why on earth didn't she sell it?' demanded Harriet.

'That's what I say,' agreed John. 'When was it, Matthew, that Curt Gardiner wanted the place? He made her a good offer — told me so himself. But would she sell? No, siree! She said she had been born in that house and she reserved the privilege of dying there. That's the answer he got. Well, the poor old soul got her wish.'

'Oh, the poor thing,' said Harriet, 'of course she did it.'

John Lawrence nodded his head in solemn emphasis. 'Yes, by George, the old lady would rather burn to death than move off Churchill Street. Jove, she had pride!'

'Yes, and pluck, too, you might say,' added Matthew, his voice breaking with an emotional tribute to an old neighbor.

'Yet if she'd sold to Gardiner when he wanted her to, she'd be alive and comfortable to-day,' said Harriet, looking steadily at Matthew.

They both suddenly turned to Victoria. She had neither moved nor spoken.

'This is no time of night for you to be sitting up, child. Why don't you go up with her, Harriet? She looks as pale as a ghost.'

Victoria lay staring toward her ceiling until dawn stole in to model familiar gray objects out of the blackness. It came over her during those hours that she must get away from Hamlin. She

was sick of it all, sick of the family, of Hastings, and of everything which made up life on the Hill. In a long waking nightmare she felt octopus arms in a deathlike embrace, and she knew the octopus was Hamlin squeezing the life out of her. Of course it was the tragic death of Miss Crowninshield which prompted this illusion, but Victoria suddenly felt strangled by the tightness of life. She saw herself being burned alive in the Big House. No — the family had burned her to save themselves. Hastings's careless reference to selling the Big House had never left her mind during the day, and the fire that very night seemed to be a horrible omen of disaster.

It was hard for Victoria to credit Hastings's story, and yet she had seen Aunt Harriet look at Uncle Matthew when they spoke of Miss Crowninshield's selling her house. Oh, how she missed Hannah! She'd have seen through the thing in the time it would take to wink her shrewd old eye. And what fun they'd have had playing spies on Aunt Harriet! Spying wasn't any fun when you were old, and you just discovered that people weren't quite square. It hadn't been fun when Ernest had let her pay his bills, and then pretended to have more bills so he could go on drawing her allowance. That had hurt something deep, which is too delicate to bear much hurting. What was afoot, anyway? Did Grandpa know? Could it be possible that he had changed his mind about the Big House, and was going to sell it away from his baby? It wasn't the material value of the thing. Victoria ground her teeth and in-

formed the darkness that she didn't care a damn about that. It was the idea — the symbol. It meant the downfall of the family — and it meant giving up her mother's room.

Well, what if the family did fall? Families were always going up or down. Even civilizations had their butterfly day. That wasn't what hurt. It was the idea that her own people — Uncle Matthew — no — never Uncle Matthew. She could not believe that. Aunt Harriet would do it in a minute. But why was Hastings so complacent? Hastings! Bah! He was just a glorified Lawrence. And she would have to be a Lawrence some day, when the octopus arms hugged tighter. What else was there to do? Didn't one eventually marry? There was Ernest. Wouldn't Hannah laugh at Ernest's polite attentions and the way Aunt Flora was urging his suit? Poor Ernest. And Len Silsby — good but dull; and Tommy Jewett, and Rus Bartlett, and Jud Emery — all nice boys, but Hastings was the pick of the lot, and she might as well admit it. Maybe after she'd been away she'd appreciate Hastings. He lived too near. That was all. How those New York girls at the Hales' house party had tried to vamp him! And it had been gratifying in a way to see how indifferent he was to all but her. Yes, she owned Hastings — but to be a Lawrence? When this very second a Lawrence was whispering into the sleepy ear of a Price to sell the Big House before it had to be burned. Nonsense! She was just silly from lack of sleep. She'd get away — away — somewhere. She knew what her mother must

have felt when she begged to visit her school friend. Escape! She'd follow her mother. Yes — oh, be still, thumping heart of little Emily's child! Be still! Aunt Harriet will hear us. We'll run away from them all. And Victoria raised her slender arms toward an indefinite feeling in the room. 'Oh, Hannah, Hannah, dear! Wherever you are, please come away with me.' Then she pressed the back of her hand hard against her teeth. She always did that till it hurt so she'd stop crying. 'Don't feel left out, little Mother. You can come too. You and Hannah and I — we'll run away!'

CHAPTER XVI

VICTORIA'S decision to run away was no midnight resolution, which cooled into impracticability with the morning. She made her vow. It comforted her. She slept.

As a usual thing she was five or ten minutes late for breakfast. This morning she came down a full hour after the family had finished. That in itself was not a propitious way to start the day. Aunt Harriet was one of those clockwork sleepers, who wake at six, whether they go to bed at ten P.M. or four A.M. She was proud of it. It was one reason why her household ran on greased wheels. The mistress was always astir to know if the toast was burned or the bacon sozzled in its own fat. Burnt and scraped toast was a capital offense in Aunt Harriet's house.

Her husband, slothful by nature and indolent by training, nourished a secret longing to have his breakfast in bed, but he never did unless he was ill — and then what did he get? Harriet herself would bring him a piece of dry toast and a cup of scalding water. And Matthew would growl, 'What's that for? I'm not going to shave!'

But Uncle Matthew as well as Victoria indulged in dreams. Often he could feel his cheeks burn with shame as he lay wakeful while his rigid wife slumbered at his side, all unconscious of the murderous dream going on close by. Perhaps they had quarreled and parted back to back, and the

sting of her words had robbed him of his sleep. Yet he knew that breakfast would be at seven-forty-five, sharp. Then it was that his favorite phantom came to regale him with a tale of Arabia. A beautiful slim maiden — not the square-faced Esther, but a nymph in softly flowing unconcealing robes, a tall, dark, willowy sprite, not unlike Victoria — would come in bearing a huge silver tray. In fact, no other than the high-fenced Tiffany platform upon which Harriet's coffee service belonged — a wedding present from the Lawrences, hence Harriet's tray.

The nymph was a powerful genie and bore her burden well. She would set it down gently right in the place where Harriet used to sleep. Then she would sweep off the white damask cover and behold! mounds of cardinal berries, like sun-bathed peaks, capped with fine, sugary snow. Soon they would look like volcanoes, for thick, wrinkled cream would rush down their plump sides. Mysterious hot covered dishes — the scent of coffee — a pot containing at least three cups — curly toast — layers of griddle cakes, oozing maple syrup and fresh butter — bacon and two fried eggs — yes, two! The nymph would discreetly vanish.

Harriet meantime was breakfasting off nectar and ambrosia, that discarnate menu which tempted Matthew about as much as playing on a golden harp.

The morning after the fire, Matthew wooed his phantom tray, and for result heard his wife's thin

voice. 'If you'd been playing bridge till three in the morning, you'd swear you weren't tired. You just take a cold shower and you'll wake up. I should think you'd learn some time before you are ninety that hot gin is a stimulant and not a sedative.'

'I never said hot gin was a sedative. Besides, you'd think old Miss Crowninshield burned herself up every night in the week.' He felt with fumbling sleepy toe for a slipper hiding under the bed.

'If she did, you'd have the D.T.'s! I'm going down now, Matthew. Won't you kindly hurry a little? It throws Maggie all out to have her muffins stand.'

When Victoria came down, Harriet had taken up a dainty pile of mending and Matthew was fussing with papers and rubber bands at his desk. He usually spent a little while sorting bills and frowning at check stubs after breakfast. It was referred to in the family as 'business,' and Victoria was supposed never to disturb him.

Her entrance was a welcome interruption to something Aunt Harriet was saying, for Uncle Matthew swung around and greeted her with as expansive a smile as his tightly wrought features would admit.

'Well, good-afternoon, Miss Vennard!' But that was only a pleasantry. Then Aunt Harriet nodded good-morning, and allowed her eyes to travel casually to the clock.

'Sorry to be so terribly late, but, Lord, what a night!'

'Had your breakfast?' inquired Uncle Matthew.

'Esther brought me up some toast and coffee. All I wanted. Nice of her, I thought. She's not half the dumb-bell she looks,' Victoria added, pretending not to see the startled look of disapproval on her aunt's face, nor the sly twinkle of delight which fled across Uncle Matthew's blood-shot eye.

She threw herself onto the davenport, stuffed a few pillows under her head and relaxed into the graceful lines of a long, lean panther at ease.

'I've decided to go away for a while,' she announced when she was quite comfortable.

Aunt Harriet ran her needle in and out her lace, folded it and laid it away in her basket.

'We're off,' said Victoria to herself. Aloud she continued: 'I don't know exactly why, but all of a sudden I'm fed up with this place.'

'This house, you mean?' asked Aunt Harriet pertinently.

'Not any more than any other house. The whole town, I mean. I want a change.'

'Well, I vow,' from Uncle Matthew.

'Nothing peculiar in that,' his wife retorted, with what sounded to Victoria like a listing over to her side. Was it possible that Aunt Harriet was not going to object? Glad to get rid of her, very likely. Well, it was mutual.

'Then you do understand, Aunt Harriet?' Victoria asked with friendly sounding eagerness.

'I cannot pretend to understand you, Victoria.

That I never could do, although I have tried all your life. But it is perfectly natural for a young person to want to go away in the summer. Unfortunately, as you know, things are so just now that your uncle and I feel that we ought to rent the cottage this year. I am wondering what we can arrange for you.'

'Oh, you needn't arrange it, Aunt Harriet. Thank you, but, please, I just want to go.'

'In order to go, my dear, you must have some destination in mind.'

'No — I haven't — that is, not exactly. I thought if you and Uncle Matthew didn't mind, I'd like to take the car and — and beat it.'

'Beat it? What an odd way to plan a trip. I was just thinking that perhaps Dorothy would take you out to the lake for the week-end. I don't believe they have anything planned.'

Victoria groaned aloud. 'The lake! Ye gods! I want to get away from the lake more than anything else, and my idea of going on a spree with Aunt Dorothy would be a lion taking a walk around his cage with his keeper! Good-night! It gives me a chill to think of it!'

'You are frank, my dear.'

Uncle Matthew was trying to smother a naughty chuckle, and coughed in order to fool himself into thinking he had succeeded.

'I was only trying to help Victoria, Matthew,' came Harriet's accusing voice. 'There was nothing humorous in my suggestion.'

'No, but it put me in mind of the time I went to Bar Harbor with Aunt Sarah — me a boy of

nine. I don't know why, but I couldn't help thinking of it. I remember it was July and she made me wear —'

'I have heard that story one thousand times, Matthew. Please give your attention to Victoria now.'

'I don't want your attention,' said Victoria desperately. 'I'm just telling you that I'm going away, and I don't know where. I don't want to know. I'll come back, all right. Don't worry about that.'

'You are going alone?'

'I fervently hope so,' said Victoria with spirit.

'I never heard of such a thing.'

'Why, surely, Aunt Harriet, you don't mean that. Every one goes everywhere nowadays.'

'But you admit that you are not going anywhere.'

'I am going to elope with myself. Mother did. She got fed up, too.'

'Victoria, I think any allusion to your mother in this connection is hardly good taste. As a matter of fact, you are exhibiting, I am afraid, just such an unstable nature as your mother and father both had, and which I hoped had been eradicated by environment. You are proving the fallacy of that outworn theory. Also, I think that just now, when you and Hastings are — What does he think of your plan?'

'I haven't consulted him.'

'Matthew, do you consider it safe or proper for a young girl to start off alone in an automobile, with no objective in view?'

Matthew cleared his throat. 'Since you ask me, I most emphatically do not.'

Harriet turned back to Victoria. 'You see, your uncle quite agrees with me. We must think of something else. You want to go to Boston?'

'Not particularly.'

'I was going to say that the Bartletts are going up on the eight o'clock. They wouldn't interfere, but they'd be some one we know.'

'I'm sick of the Bartletts.'

'You are in a very contrary mood. I don't see how I can help you.'

'If — if you go, Victoria, better not take the car,' suggested Uncle Matthew gently. 'Anything might happen. Girl alone, you know. Supposing some fellow asked for a ride. Might be a —'

'Bootlegger!' laughed Victoria. 'In that case, what should I do, Uncle Matthew? Liberty or Law? Why, I read in the paper about a girl only nineteen, who drove alone in her Ford from Akron, Ohio, to San Francisco, and took in the Yellowstone besides! I wouldn't go that far, though. And if you are worried about the bus being gone, just ask Hasty. He'd adore to take you.'

'Why, Victoria Vennard! I should never dream of such a thing!' Aunt Harriet was aghast at the indelicacy of the proposal.

'Why?' asked Victoria with assumed innocence. 'He'd just as soon taxi you to your parties as not. He has nothing else to do.'

'I doubt if Hastings would care to hear you say that, my dear. Moreover, that is quite beside the point. You are at perfect liberty to take the car,

since it is yours. Your uncle and I can manage somehow. You think it over, and when you decide just when and where you want to go, we'll devise some plan — which does not savor of the menagerie! And now, if you are quite rested, my dear, I'd like to get down to the fish market before eleven. You needn't sigh, Matthew. You know what the doctor said about so much meat in summer. Kindly leave the ordering to me, will you, Matthew?'

'Any time you're ready, just say the word,' replied Victoria, with no more trace of the recent altercation in her voice than in her aunt's.

CHAPTER XVII

LATE that afternoon Marjorie Hale dropped in to see Victoria.

'My dear!' she burst out as soon as she was inside the door. 'Mother says you are planning to go away.'

'How in the devil did she get hold of it?'

'Aunt Agnes Bartlett met Mother in the Paris this morning. She thought perhaps you'd go up on the eight o'clock with them. All the Bartletts are going up for some concert. Quite some party for Papa. How do you suppose they worked it?'

'I'm not going up with them.'

'Well, I should hope not, my dear. I knew there was some mistake. In the first place, there is my picnic Sunday, and in the second, Hasty wouldn't stand for it.'

'You don't think so?'

'Why, certainly not! He's greeny-eyed over Rus.'

'Not really,' gasped Victoria, not displeased. 'How do you know?'

'Oh, he hasn't forgotten that you and Rus went moon-gazing at my house party. He's furious, my dear, only he knows you too well to show it. Say, Vic, is it all right to smoke? I'm perished for one. Made calls all afternoon with Mother — every one home. Just my luck, and my dear, tea

— tea — tea, till I'm fairly stuffed with brownies — one pure household after another, and no fire-works whatsoever.'

'I don't know, Marj. I'd just as soon take a chance on smoking in the garage. Aunt Harriet is about due, but take one if you want. It's nothing to me.'

'Oh, well, then —'

'Go ahead. If Uncle Matthew shows up first, we'll invite him to have a cigar. She's got a keen old whiffer, though.'

'Thanks,' as Victoria gave her a light. 'To proceed, my dear, have you forgotten my picnic? We need you and we need your car.'

'Me and my car will be off on a cruise.'

'How thrilling! Honestly?'

'I have a suspicion not, but I never did believe that honesty and policy were related.'

'You old pill! Vic! Are you cutting off? How hectic!'

'You bet it will be hectic. Drop around and take Aunt Harriet's temperature about Tuesday, will you?'

'Tell me! You've got to! Besides, I think you're a pig not to let me go too.'

'How about your precious picnic?'

'Oh, we'll let it go hang.'

'Sorry, Marjy, but I don't want anybody.'

'All right, piker. I couldn't go, anyway. Mother would have a fit. Tell me! Is it a war with Aunt Harriet?'

'Nothing to tell. I simply have a vague notion that I'll hop a freight, as the bad man says. What's

the sense in eloping if you've got to tell everybody in town?'

'Eloping, my dear! Is Hasty going?'

'Heavens, no! Me and myself and I — the Three Musketeers, minus the tears — praise God!'

'Imagine! Then you won't be here Sunday?'

'Doubtful.'

'What about Hasty?'

'He'll be here as far as I know.'

'Yes, but the picnic? It would be simply stunning to have Hasty without you. You know what I mean, dearest. He's such a heavy lover, that as far as an extra man goes, he's a total loss when you're around. I was just thinking if Bunny Harris would come up from Seal — what an orgy she'd have with Hasty. Believe me, if he was mine I'd blindfold him. I mean I'd blindfold every other woman but myself. Vic, he gets handsomer every year. Imagine him in the movies! Did you ever think of it?'

'No, but I bet he has.'

'Oh, unkind thrust! You wouldn't talk like that if you weren't too sure of him.'

'But, given an arrow collar chin and a cupid's bow mouth, it's shoot if you must!'

'Oh, Vic, you are a scream! But wouldn't it be the darnedest joke on you if he did really give you the slip? I doubt if you really appreciate Hasty.'

'Could a mere mortal appreciate Apollo? I haven't a classic soul, Marj. Here's a good one, just to prove that Hasty doesn't lack for appreciation. We were talking about conceit the other day, and I said I thought most men overestimated

their powers of attraction. Hasty remarked modestly, "Well, I'm damn sure I don't!"

'It would serve you right if some one should hook him right out from under your nose. Churchill Street wasn't populated with old maids from choice.'

'I'm just about pessimistic enough to be an old maid, to-day. Bear with me, dear one. The liver is probably on a strike. Wouldn't it be tragic if I have inherited Uncle Matthew's liver! I'd gladly adopt Aunt Harriet's, if I was sure she'd have to go without it.'

'You're a perfect cat — which reminds me, my dear — Gallet!'

'Don't tell me anything has happened to Gallet!' Victoria was all concern.

'My dear, the worst!'

'Oh, no!'

'Yes, my dear. After I have chaperoned that cat from the time she was the size of a mouse! I have lost sleep over that cat! I have caught my death of cold over that cat! Only for this!'

'What? Go on!'

'Well, I haven't seen you since she disappeared!'

'Oh, Marj, how could you be so careless?'

'Careless, my dear? She simply did not appear. Roger came in—alone! I said, "Roger Hale, where is your sister?" He simply said, "Perow," and went to bed. Roger always says "perow" and Gallet says "meow," masculine and feminine for "hello," I suppose. Anyway, no Gallet! Well, my dear, I waited and I waited. Still no Gallet. I went to bed. Imagine! The first night

since that cat was born, I went to sleep without knowing where she was.'

'Marj, I think that's cruel. Why Jack Dempsey never —'

'Jack Dempsey is a male, my dear. I never dreamed of such a thing! But, anyway, the next morning — let's see, that was the day before the fire. I suppose everything on the Hill will be A.D. or B.C. in reference to the fire from now on. Well, next morning Katy came running up to my room. "Oh, Miss Marjorie, come look at Gallet!" My dear, she was as flat as a pancake! At first I said, "My Lord, Katy, has she been run over?"

"No, marm, listen!" Then, my dear, the most entrancing little ip-ip-ip-! And right out in the laundry on top of a pile of ironing-cloths, two infinitesimal cats!'

'Oh, Marj, imagine it!'

'Yes, my dear! And there was Gallet weaving around my feet, and making the most simpering noises. I've never been so thrilled!'

Victoria locked her hands in ecstatic contemplation of Gallet's performance. 'Marj,' she said after a moment, 'may I have one? One of the kittens?'

Marjorie shrieked. 'Merciful Heavens, no! Do you suppose for one instant that I'd allow Jack Dempsey to eat up Gallet's kittens? My entire purpose in life will be to conserve those cats. Only two, think of it! That's because she is so frightfully high bred!'

'And you didn't notice that she was going to have them?'

‘Certainly not. Did you? I tell you, Gallet is no ordinary cat. Besides, I didn’t dream for one instant that kittens that age had little cats! I don’t know how she did it — angora, I suppose. Roger always looks fat, even when he has fleas. Well, my dear, on top of that, the fire! Talk about a hectic town!’

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was characteristic of the Prices that the subject of Victoria's going away was not broached again. It was equally characteristic of Victoria that she packed her bag that night, and only waited until she had deposited Aunt Harriet at the hair-dresser's and Uncle Matthew at the club before collecting her traps and getting under way.

She left a casual message with Esther. 'Just tell the family I've gone, and I don't know when I'll be back. Don't forget Jack Dempsey's salmon. We're most out, and for pity's sake, don't forget to send a taxi for Aunt Harriet at eleven!' Then a dollar for putting Jack Dempsey to bed, and she was off. Not quite, for Maggie came waddling out to the car with a fitted tea-basket, a thermos case, and a bag of apples. 'I thought ye'd be wanting a bit of a lunch by your lone,' she grinned, her Gallic soul thoroughly understanding the call of the open road.

The nowhere of her vague plans had almost involuntarily shaped itself into a somewhere, and then Aunt Harriet's reference to her mother's historic performance clinched it. She would make a pilgrimage to the scene of her mother's brief happiness.

The excited air of a desperado fleeing from too much justice now subsided into the calm serenity of a palmer journeying to a distant shrine. The palmer snickered to herself as she leaned back

against the deep cushion, free and sure as a bird winging home.

Harriet was curiously calm when the news came out, even when lunch was over, and there was no one to hear but Matthew. For some reason, obscure to Matthew, she chose to be agrieved, which was trying. He knew what to expect when Harriet mounted her high horse and pawed the ground with all six hoofs, but this hurt, offended woman baffled his downright male comprehension.

He had to feel sorry for her, because she was his wife, and she would be angry if he weren't, but if he sympathized too much, then that threw all the more blame onto Victoria. Cuss the child! What did she want to go and run away for?

It was evening. Harriet had taken out her knitting, a soft green golf stocking for Matthew. The wounded expression had worn off, and now and then she would screw her lips into a not unpleasant pucker, and nod in silent approbation to some inner suggestion. Matthew hoped that the episode was going to pass without further discussion. But no.

'Matthew,' came a firm voice. 'I have come to the conclusion that this performance of Victoria's is providential. I have felt it strongly ever since dinner, and I know I am right.'

'How's that? Think it will do her good to run her oats off a little?'

'Oh, I fancy when it comes to oats, she'll sow

them faster than she can run them off. Blood tells, after all, doesn't it, Matthew?'

'Thicker than water, if that's what you mean,' said Matthew, with an uneasy feeling that it wasn't at all what he intended to say, but Harriet granted him a shrewd look, and marveled that he could have said just that.

'Take Victoria,' she went on. 'Could any girl have had a more careful bringing-up? She has had every advantage, every luxury, every refinement, and yet look at her! Nobody knows where she is to-night. Think of it — a girl of her class!'

'I don't dare think of it.' Matthew shuddered.

'Nonsense, Matthew! Where is there to go but Boston? She has made Portland, put up at the Congress Square Hotel, and is probably about to attend a moving-picture show unchaperoned.'

'Well, that's all right — safe enough, isn't it? Why did you say you didn't know where she was, then? That's no way to talk. I don't want to get so worked up I can't sleep, when there isn't a devilish thing I can do about it. If you're worried, say so, and if you aren't, why, so much the better. That's the way I look at it. I guess she'll be home to-morrow.' Which was a very long, sustained speech for Matthew.

Harriet waited with assumed patience, but with evident lack of interest to what he had to say, and then spoke. 'Now that she has gone, Matthew, it is time for us to act.'

It was no good to pretend that he didn't know what she meant. He did. And it cut off his breath for a second.

'Oh, let's not get at it to-night. That devilish Hollandaise is raising Ned with my stomach.'

'I am sorry, dear.'

That was ominous. Harriet had refrained from remarking that three helpings of cauliflower and Hollandaise would raise Ned with a copper boiler. And Matthew had exposed his weakness with heroic design to draw her fire.

'Matthew, it has got to be done.'

'Not with her away. It looks too — too — It goes against the grain. For God's sake, can't you ever get a man's point of view? The Big House is as good as hers now. Father has failed this last week.'

'Yes, and this thoughtful departure of his devoted grandchild won't improve his health.'

'What I say. We mustn't let him know.'

'I am afraid it will be necessary, Matthew.'

'Why?'

'Because she has forced our hand. I can't see it any other way. Silsby says it's the thing to do, and now.'

'Silsby! I'd like to know why he's so damned anxious.'

'Wouldn't you prefer a private transaction to a FOR SALE sign on the Big House? He's had one or two handsome offers, which in my opinion we are very foolish to turn down.'

'Harriet, if you will allow me to remind you — you always seem to refer to the Big House as if it was yours, when it isn't even mine.'

'Excuse me, dear. It belongs to Grandpa, and you, as his eldest son and I as your wife, have a

slight romantic though impersonal interest. I'll try to remember. We'll say that Mr. Silsby, our man of business, would not be discharging his full duty to the family if he refuses a cash offer for a house which is slowly falling out of repair.'

'Repair nothing! The old place will hold up when every building in this town is laid flat. They don't build them like that any more.'

'Do you know how much it will cost to paint that house, Matthew? It needs painting badly, and if it goes another year, it will take two coats.'

'What of it?'

'Your arguments are puerile.'

'I'm not arguing, am I? I tell you I've got an infernal pain in my side.'

'Bicarbonate will fix it. And the gutter on the ell has started off. The sills under the garage need to be replaced. The conservatory is a wreck. I should think you'd have pride enough in the street to prefer to see the Big House kept up by people who can afford to live in it, rather than let it go to seed like poor Miss Crowninshield's — all for the sake of maintaining an invalid who will never go downstairs again.'

'That's just the point. Father would never move.'

'Then he may have to be moved,' said Harriet, her dense black eyes throwing off a surface glitter.

'What about your precious scheme for moving over?' Matthew flared back. 'Thought we three were going to move over and everything would be like pie. All we needed was a funeral and a wedding, and we were fixed.'

'If I supposed that Hastings and Victoria would live in the Big House eventually, it would be a different matter, but I do not. In the first place, it is doubtful if Hastings would care to. He has never been impressed with the glory of the Big House. In fact he is quite amused at the significance which you all attach to it.'

'But I guess Victoria would have something to say. She's cocky enough now, and you let her be mistress of a few million, and I rather suspect Mr. Hastings will do a pile of listening to what's what.'

'Hastings will never marry Victoria.'

'What?'

'I feel it.'

'When in the devil did you start feeling that way?'

'Don't be coarse, please, Matthew. It isn't becoming to people our age. Victoria is bound to do something which will disgust both Dorothy and Hastings, though John seems to like her.'

'D say he does. You should hear him out at the club. Sometimes I get pretty mad the way he acts as if he owned —'

'So you are jealous of John over Victoria. That is a very dignified attitude, I must say.'

'Well, Harriet, if you don't take the cake! I never said anything of the sort. I simply agreed with your statement; John likes Victoria. Well, he does, and we'll let it go at that. Of course, living up to Dorothy would be a cat of another color. You tell Hastings that you don't think he'll marry Victoria, and I guess you'll hear something.'

'You mark my words, Matthew. Victoria is riding for a fall. I know the Lawrences better than you do, and I know just how much they will stand.'

'Well, I have a sneaking idea that the Vennards don't stand such a deuce of a lot of crowding.'

'Matthew, it is almost ridiculous the way you seize every opportunity to defend Victoria's family. Bert was speaking about it the other day. He thinks Victoria has you right under her thumb. Flora laughed and said you were a Vennard by adoption.'

'Well, what of it? I've come to know the girl in the last twenty-odd years. That's more than any of the rest of you have done.'

'There you are mistaken, but I make allowance for the fact that she undoubtedly possesses a subtle charm, although I think it is rather a physical magnetism, which your sex is quicker to feel than mine. She certainly got that from the Vennards! What's more, I think she deliberately exerts it. Men and children and servants always feel it. It is a dangerous quality and never brings happiness to those who fall victim.'

'Hear you talk, you'd think the child was a regular vampire. There's a lot of good in that girl, you let the right man bring it out. And I don't say there isn't a lot of devilment in her, too. She's a hard little ticket, but you come to get underneath, as I have once or twice, and Victoria's as soft as a kitten.'

'Analyzing Victoria is very interesting, but I

want to see Silsby again. I want to put this thing through.'

'When have you talked with Silsby?'

'Countless times. The only thing which remains to be done is to convince your father.'

'Quite the majority of the job, I'd say. And I don't say you've convinced me yet, either.'

'The house isn't yours, dear, as you have so often reminded me. Have you anything better to suggest? The way this miserable property is managed is enough to drive a sensible man like Silsby insane. He says it ought to be split up, and each of us have his own.'

'It is not our custom,' said Matthew stiffly, abiding by the way of the Prices, though through it he had lost his patrimony.

Harriet favored him with a slow, scornful smile. 'It is the Price custom to treat grown men like minors, and Silsby thinks it is the most ridiculous business he ever had to do with.'

'Silsby was not hired to express his opinion of our policies, but to attend to his business — which is ours.' Matthew was all Price when the clan was criticized.

'It would have been so much more dignified, Matthew, if you had taken this violent interest in "your" business years ago. Then we shouldn't be dependent on an outsider. For instance, had you any idea what those forest fires around Ashland cost us?'

'I'm ready to cut down.'

'We promised to cut down years ago. What did it amount to? Silsby says that you and Bert are

drawing larger incomes than Grandpa can afford to pay. That is the long and short of it. Now we can't make capital. Grandpa won't sell timberland. He is as pig-headed on that score as the rest of his generation. But if we could realize cash on the Big House, it would tide us over. Silsby says things are bound to come back. Grandpa sees in a way. Silsby has been hammering at him little by little.'

'I don't want him hammered at!' Matthew puffed out his lips in an effort to express facial authority.

'As I said, your passion for influence should have made itself felt years ago. It doesn't seem to matter now what you want, Matthew.' This truth was beyond argument, and Matthew slipped down in his chair, helpless though disapproving. 'It's just an old man's sentiment that makes him so stubborn. We — Silsby cannot seem to make him understand that Victoria will have to live where her husband chooses. Because he prefers to set aside the Salic Law, others don't.'

'I didn't know Silsby had talked with Father.'

'Yes, you did. You've forgotten. Sometimes you are so dozy when I try to talk to you, I wonder whether you are taking it in or not.'

'That's very likely — very likely, indeed,' said Matthew with elaborate sarcasm. 'Guess you and Silsby wanted to get it pretty well sewed up before you let me in. Well, God knows I'm no hand for business. What can I say? Nobody considers me. I'm nobody!'

'Matthew, was it not considerate of us to ar-

range to have the Big House in other hands before time for the will to come out? Silsby thinks he can make Grandpa make a new will, and at least omit any reference to the house. It won't look quite so much as if he had disowned you. It will simplify matters in more than one way if we accept this offer now.'

Matthew thought this over. It was a new angle and by far the most convincing. 'Humn! Who is this party, if I may ask? Some Jew trader who wants to start a synagogue on Churchill Street?'

'You may as well think of just such a possibility. Several very attractive offers have been made, which Silsby is too much of a gentleman to consider. How would you like to see the Big House a Catholic lying-in hospital?'

'You don't say!'

'Yes, exactly that. The Bishop or something or other of the Portland Diocese has been here looking it over, and they have unlimited funds. This person, who has made the best offer, is a lumberman, more or less like your father, I should say. He offers one hundred thousand dollars cash.'

Matthew's eyes popped. 'Never dreamed the old place was worth that much.'

'It isn't. This man has so much ready money he doesn't know what to do with it. He has set his heart upon moving his family onto Churchill Street and is willing to pay for it.'

'One hundred thousand dollars! Wouldn't it go right to father, though? The house is his till he dies.'

'Certainly, but he has no use for anything

more than he has, and it could be applied at once to the running expenses of the family. Silsby says there are terrible bills. Ernest is a perfect little leech on Bertram.'

'Pretty state of things!' Matthew drummed with the tips of his stubby fingers and tried to concentrate upon the enormity of the proposed transaction. But years of avoiding concentration made it a difficult mental gymnastic feat, and he gave it up. He could think of nothing to say. He dared not raise objection in the name of Victoria, although deep down in him he knew that he should stand champion of her rights. She was being wronged, he felt that strongly, and he should stand firm, but they had him cornered. If he dragged Victoria in, Harriet would ridicule him. He chose silence.

CHAPTER XIX

HAD Victoria realized that in putting up at the Congress Square, and taking herself unchaperoned to the movies, her aunt's smug prophecy would come true, it would have robbed her adventure of all glamour. But she did just that and exulted in her unconventionality. Her craving to get away from the family was not the restlessness of unemployed youth. It was a very real need for soul room.

If her Aunt Harriet could have seen her, slouched low in a seat of a crowded picture palace, munching a solitary bag of popcorn, and joyously losing herself both in the audience and the film, she would have seen nothing but plebeian strains urging their hybrid offspring to revert to the ancestral type. She would have remarked with sarcasm, which would have been the simple truth, that Victoria was just being herself.

She had felt the pressure of the family and of the Hill all her life without realizing what was crowding her. It was the Bartletts' innocent migration on the popular eight o'clock which gave her the final push. The Bartletts always moved in close family formation. How ghastly to marry Rus Bartlett, and be drawn into their pious ranks!

It seemed as though she could not have endured another day, another minute, of the prescribed existence she had just escaped. Routine, convention, tradition, circumspection — that was life.

It was like the well-regulated households of Hamlin — spring cleaning and screens, to fall cleaning and double windows, and then back. How had she borne it so long? Suddenly detached from the precision of her native environment, she recalled certain figures in the stilted dance performed year after year by Hamlin, to the decorous tune of established order.

A day in the first week of June. Victoria and Marjorie Hale are little girls, bouncing their return balls up Churchill Street, because it is the season for return balls. Marjorie announces with conscious pride and importance, 'Our linen covers are on. Come on in.' The girls enter the side door with suppressed excitement, and step noiselessly into the big front parlor. They stare at the well-known pudgy shapes, immaculately gowned in cool, dust-proof linen. They try each chair, and sink rapturously into its fat depths, then run delighted fingers around the neatly taped seams of the slip covers. Down the front stair carpet runs a spotless linen strip, held in place by brass rods. These the girls investigate with loving fingers. They are as thrilling as a last year's straw hat, or a faded outgrown gingham dress. Summer!

Not an inverted firmament starred with tiny violets, nor the sweet call of the wood pewee, nor the tender new green of uncrumpling baby leaves, nor the languorous perfume of lilacs, but the Hales' linen-covered furniture had been their herald of short, precious summer! Super-civilized little apes, thought Victoria.

A bodily escape seemed necessary to save her

soul. Later, Victoria was to discover in the rich depths of her own resources that escape may be mental, and to those who find the golden key the cell unlocks and the universe becomes a public playground.

Then she thought of Aunt Harriet proposing that she be convoyed by a moving battalion of Hamlin, even while trying to escape from Hamlin itself. There could never be escape for Aunt Harriet.

Could she never be made to understand that Victoria's reason for running away was not half so much to escape from the place, as from their eternal cramming of Hamlin laws and Hamlin standards and Hamlin taboos down her throat? It was like having to take too much of anything. You don't hate the thing itself as much as the power that forces it on you. It was the same with Hastings. They had spoiled him for her. She was not allowed to take him at her own estimate, as one is supposed to take the facts of life. He must be boosted and boomed by the family and the whole Hill, for fear she wouldn't appreciate him. She must value him as a Lawrence and a Hastings, not as a man. Well, she was thankful to get away from him, too. Weren't there any old people who remembered their own youth, and the need of young things to be let alone?

But the Aunt Harriets do not realize that what they often take for undisciplined egotism is the legitimate egoism of youth, that inner craving of the captive soul to set itself free in its native element, the infinite.

As Victoria was swept out of the theater by a jostling mass of humans, she did not feel crowded. She was not feeling egotistical, not vainglorious in her defiance of Hamlin's mores. She was blissfully unaware of herself. Her soul was experiencing an almost Brahmin exaltation, finding rest and peace in the Nirvana of a strange and unfamiliar throng.

She reached Portsmouth easily the next day with no mishap. Victoria was too modern a product and too good a driver to court adventure on the road. She drove carefully and lawfully alone. The restless urge to do something desperate had melted away in sleep. She was utterly tranquil. According to accepted authorities upon morals and ethics, she should have been sorely troubled at the thought of her anxious family. But her heart was like a feather. She was not thinking about her family. She was thinking first of all about the road, and occasionally she gave a thought to the high blue sky with its cloudy cream puffs sailing before a good sea breeze. She drank in the first tang of seaweed on the air, and the romantic in her saluted the first sight of a loaded vessel headed for ports unknown.

What filial thought she entertained had to do with her mother, who had escaped from the family and then from life itself, in order to find breathing space. And she built a fancy or two about her father as she drove across the bridge into his town.

The reserved dignity of Portsmouth fascinated her at once. It seemed oddly at variance with the

Price conception of her father's murky background. As she passed the tall, stately houses on Middle and Islington Streets, she felt the charm of pre-Revolutionary days. They had something which Hamlin did not possess. There were no estates as grand as the Big House, no parks of iron deer, no fancy cupolas, no ornate cast-iron fences: just three-story square colonial homes with fanlights over the doors and imposing silver plates under their polished knockers. She imagined that they sneered at her modern sight-seeing tour, and lowered supercilious lids over inhospitable eyes.

Victoria's heart beat with wild excitement. Why should she feel so alien to those aristocratic old houses? Perhaps she belonged to one of them. At any rate, half of her belonged to Portsmouth. She wanted to discover a link, but feared to unearth something which would shatter her proud dream with ugly reality. She wanted to find that little house in Vaughan Street where her mother and father had sought happy refuge, but a feeling of delicacy forbade, even though it had been possible to find it. They had hidden themselves from the family, and at least she would be gentleman enough to respect their secret. Besides, she had a horrible suspicion that the romantic home of her parents' young love might be transformed into a dirty Italian boarding-house.

But the desire to know something of her father's people, her very own folks, was too strong for fear of disillusion. If he were the child of one of those beautiful old homes, then she would be

glad, of course, but if he had come from a drab, huddled tenement in one of those narrow little side streets, then she would love him all the more, and they would have a secret from the Prices.

She had been saturated with Price atmosphere long enough, and in justice to that dominant other part of herself, the black-haired, gray-eyed part, which so often revolted against her Nordic captors, she decided to investigate her pedigree.

At the Rockingham Hotel she inquired about the Vennards, and took the address of the only surviving member of the family. Since the name was Miss Amelia, Victoria judged that after four would be the proper time for a call.

The subject of ancestry being uppermost in her mind, it was not unnatural that she should cast a thought in the direction of her maternal grandfather. She did so, and felt a sickening rush of affection and guilt. She hadn't been running away from Grandpa, but she had treated him like all the rest. She dashed over to the desk and demanded telegraph blanks, then wrote:

DEAREST GRANDPA, Forgive me for running away. I am at the Rockingham, Portsmouth, thinking about Mother and what you told me. If you want me wire.

VIXEN

To the clerk's polite though astonished protest against such an expensive note to be sent at day rates, Victoria merely told him to rush it. That done, she enjoyed a peaceful lunch.

At four o'clock she mounted the smoothly scrubbed stone steps of the most impressive brick

house of all. She felt like *The Little Princess*, and scarcely lifted the heavy knocker.

The door opened and Victoria thought of a Wallace Nutting picture. She was invited to follow the maid into the right-hand room and there, seated in a winged armchair, about to pour herself a cup of tea, sat Miss Amelia Vennard, a cameo face above black cashmere and soft white mull. Her hair was as silver as snow in the moonlight, and her eyes, as she looked up at Victoria, darkly fringed with lashes which did not belong to snowy hair.

Victoria stood on the threshold, thinking that never in her life had she seen any one so beautiful.

'A young lady to see you, Miss Vennard,' the maid announced softly.

'Come in, come in, dear. I can't see your face. Is it Janey? What is it, the Red Cross? Some one telephoned.'

'I ought to have told the maid, but I wasn't sure you would know my name. I am Victoria Vennard, of Hamlin, Maine.'

'Oh, my soul!' cried the old lady. 'Huldah, draw up a chair, so I can see her. Huldah, quick! Did you hear? She is Victor's child. Take her things. Bring tea and cake, and some little tarts if there are any.'

Victoria sat down. She had prepared a more or less haughty announcement of herself, and this warm, trembling reception was overwhelming.

'I — I didn't think you knew about me,' she said, quite without her usual nonchalant ease.

Miss Vennard held out her hands. Victoria rose

and took them in hers, looking down into wide gray eyes under straight black brows like her own. She saw a slender, high-bridged nose, similar to the one she had powdered a thousand times, and the same delicate mouth, thin and wrinkled, but still slightly curving. The cheeks were sallow and mottled, but firm, and there were Victoria's very own square little jaw and saucy chin. With that deep look into the face of a true Vennard, Victoria lost all fear of growing old.

The old lady held her hands and gazed searchingly into the lovely face above her, and remembered what it was to be young.

'Victor's child! Victor's little baby. How good of you to come! Tell me about yourself. I cannot believe it. Tell me how you found me, how you knew that I was still alive. I am the very last, dear. Just think of it. The last one in this great house. Sad, isn't it? I am sorry the others are not here to greet you. But I want to hear. Now sit down with your tea — no, closer. That's right. Tell me everything.'

'But first,' began Victoria, turning to catch Huldah's fatuous smile as she handed the tea — 'first, I really don't know just who you are — what relation to me, I mean. I looked up the only one of our name in town.'

'I see. Of course you didn't know. I am your father's aunt — his father's sister. It seems as if I must be dreaming — Victor's baby!'

'Is his — have I a grandmother, or —'

'No, dear. I am the last of the Vennards.'

'Not now,' said Victoria.

'No, bless your heart! Oh, how I wish his mother and father could see you! You are little Victor, only lovelier. If they could only see you, I know they would forgive him.'

Victoria looked puzzled, and the old lady went on. 'It is all passed and gone now. Perhaps they have forgiven him. I always think in my prayers that they are together. I was bitter, too, in those days, but that was before I was all alone and had time to think things out.'

'About their marriage, you mean — my father's marriage to my mother?' Victoria felt as if she were reciting the well-learned lines of a play — interested in the development of plot and characters, but only pretending to belong.

'Yes, his father was very angry. You will forgive me, dear, but you asked me. We had such high hopes for Victor. He was an only son, handsome, brilliant, upright, and brave. We were so proud of his standing in the navy. And there was his fiancée, our little neighbor. He broke her heart and ours.'

'I didn't know that,' said Victoria under her breath, 'and I don't believe my mother did.'

'Perhaps not,' said Miss Vennard without conviction. 'We thought him the very soul of honor till he did this thing. To this day I cannot imagine how he could have forgotten his little childhood sweetheart — more of a sister she was than a lover. Think of her humiliation — and the shameful secrecy of it. Oh, my dear, how we suffered!'

'Perhaps if you had known my mother, you

would have felt differently,' said Victoria very quietly.

'How could we? I hate to hurt you, dear, but that was quite impossible. You can understand, since you are one of us — partly Vennard at least.'

Victoria gasped at the strange approach to the well-known story. She felt queer and small, the way the proud old houses had made her feel that morning, only very much worse. She almost wished Aunt Harriet were there, high shoulders raised, haughty eyebrows lifted, and thin, pinched nose drawn tight at the nostrils. The sight of her snobbish face would have been a welcome support. She felt the Price prestige slipping, melting before this arrogant dowager. She wanted to stop her, yet she wanted to hear.

'I must begin by asking you to forgive us all. We were a proud family, Victoria. I used to believe that the Vennards were really better than other people, but now I know that they were only more fortunate. They were fortunate in having wealth and position, but most of all in their choice of other families when they mated. Perhaps we did well to be proud of that, but one did not discuss eugenics in those days. To put it frankly, and brutally, perhaps, we did as most prejudiced families do under the circumstances — we blamed your mother. We felt that we could not receive a girl who would do that sort of thing. Victor's father cut him off.'

'How perfectly abominable! You wouldn't even see her, and let her speak for herself?'

'I am sorry, dear. It was Victor's fault, of course, even more than hers, very likely. We couldn't forgive the secrecy, or the attempt at secrecy. When we discovered that he had a room in an out-of-the-way boarding-house, and — a wife — can't you imagine our feelings about the girl? He begged us to take his wife into our home when his ship was ordered to China, and we refused. His mother never saw him again.'

'They were worse than my family!'

'This is your family, too,' reminded the old lady. 'That was long ago.'

'I think if you had looked up my mother's people, you would have found them quite respectable,' said Victoria stiffly. 'They took me when my own father never even called to see me, and brought me up as their own. I realize now that I do belong to them. I have never been grateful or loyal — or anything. They were angry with my mother, just as you were with my father, but they let her come home — and die there, even if they did consider that she had disgraced the family!' Victoria was fighting desperately for time in which to find her handkerchief before bursting into violent tears.

'Oh, don't, child! It was just an old woman's want of tact.'

Victoria sniffed haughtily.

'You see, old people become indifferent. The past and present are equally unimportant. I forgot that young things live in the present. Now let me give you some tea. Look up at me. Oh, child, if you knew how many times I have looked

in the mirror and seen those same great tragic eyes full of tears, and that same little pink nose. Would you believe it if I should tell you that when I was your age, I looked very like you? I'll find a daguerreotype for you before you go home. Would you like it? And some funny old pictures of your father, when he was a fat little boy in kilts, and then when he was such a pigeon-breasted young midshipman? Would you like them?'

'Yes,' sighed Victoria, almost inaudibly.

'Well, then, stop crying. Suppose Huldah should come in with more tarts and find that I had made my guest cry. What do you think she'd do to me?'

Victoria was smiling now, not so much at what Huldah might do to punish her mistress, but at her aunt's unconscious estimate of her age. No doubt she had acted like a ten-year-old, first going into a temper, and then spoiling the whole effect by crying. But it did seem funny to be treated like a baby — funny and rather nice.

'I'm sorry I flared up like that,' said Victoria simply. 'Please forgive me. It's the excitement, perhaps, and finding you, and feeling sorry for my mother, shut away in that horrid little house, and about his mother never seeing him again — although I think it served her right,' she added with a flaming blush at the thought of it.

'You wouldn't be a Vennard if you didn't flare up in defense of your family. Nothing could prove you any more your father's child than your loyalty to your mother. He defended her family, although he never had seen them. He defied his

father, and gave up a fortune because we refused to accept his wife.'

Victoria was crying again.

'There's a long mirror in the hall. Go out and powder our nose,' laughed Miss Vennard, with tears in her eyes too.

Victoria gratefully obeyed. Across the hall she could see into another big room, evidently the formal drawing-room. She caught a blurred impression of rose and silver and mahogany, which shone like dull garnets.

When Miss Vennard proposed that each have another cup of tea, into which they should drown their tears and their family feud, and that they should drink to the last of the Vennards, Victoria threw herself whole-heartedly into the ceremony. She was herself again. She felt established. She was not only a Vennard among Vennards, but also a Price among Vennards, and holding her own.

'Will you tell me about the wicked school friend?' asked Victoria. 'She is part of our family skeleton.'

'The girl who brought Victor to call on your mother?' Miss Vennard's voice broke in a sound which was almost like Victoria's giggle. 'She is the arch villainess according to our version, too. Poor Mary Baxter. She was a nice girl, although we never cared for her mother. They were fearfully hurt, of course, over our attitude, for I suppose she acted quite innocently.'

'Isn't it funny? Oh, you can't know how really humorous the thing is!' Victoria tried to explain.

'Oh, it's no use. You'd simply have to know my family to know how funny it is. They won't mention Mary Baxter's name to this day. The Prices had it wiped off the Book of Life, so she'd get to heaven anonymous, only I guess they'd be surprised to find her in heaven.'

'I can appreciate how it must sound to you, having been brought up on the other side. How provincial we all are!'

'If you only knew Aunt Harriet, then you could understand. She was a Lawrence, and you should hear the tone in which she pronounces our name — "Vinnard"! I always think she is going to say vinegar.'

'A Lawrence, you say? Of Boston?'

'Originally.'

'I know the Samuel Lawrences slightly.' Miss Vennard was picking up an important thread.

'Samuel Lawrence's cousin John lives across the street from us. In fact — oh, my goodness! I entirely forgot Hastings.'

'Hastings? That is a Boston name, too.'

'Yes, Hastings Lawrence's mother was Dorothy Hastings.'

'And they are Hamlin people?' Miss Vennard's polite voice expressed the surprise she was feeling, but hoping to conceal.

'Yes. I was going to say that I am engaged to Hastings Lawrence — that is, I was. To be perfectly frank with you, the engagement is rather indefinite right now. You see, I ran away.'

'You ran away! Why didn't you tell me? What has happened? Won't your family be

worried? You haven't — Victoria! You haven't done what your mother did?' The old lady's eyes grew dark with fright.

'No. Oh, mercy, no! I just came away to be alone, and, well, in a way I did do what my mother did, I suppose. I wanted to find my father.'

'You blessed child! You've come straight home, and now you must let Huldah take you to your room. How did you come? Where are your things?'

'I drove, and my things are at the hotel — but —'

'Do you want to stay? Don't you feel that you belong enough to stay with your father's old Aunt Milly?'

'Oh, yes. I want to stay. I'd adore to.' She rose impulsively and went over to her aunt, who drew her down to kiss her. Victoria blushed and swallowed hard lest she cry again. She couldn't remember when any one had kissed her like that. 'I can't say what I want to, it's too choky right now. You have made me feel as if I went down so much deeper than before. And you don't know how wonderful it is to look like somebody — somebody beautiful like you, and not just a made-up ancestor, who doesn't look like any one, except that he has black hair and is queer because he doesn't look like the Prices. I have always been made to feel that black hair was a crime. You see, I have never really belonged, in spite of what I said just now when I was mad. I have always felt that I was just painted on the surface of the family, while all the others had roots. It

has made me lonesome and moody, and I guess pretty horrid at times. There was only one person who really understood me when I was little, and she is dead. Some day I'll tell you about Hannah. I can't now. And I'd love you to know my grandfather. We understand each other, but he's sick and very old. I used to encourage the disagreeable side of myself, so no one would know how lonely I was. I liked being an outlaw, and I am afraid I have enjoyed hurting them, because, when I was a little girl, they used to make me unhappy, and I — I can't forget it. I have never told any one before, not even Hannah. I knew she would resent it so, and, after all, you can't allow your cook to resent your family too much.'

'Oh, don't, dear. I can't stand any more to-day. I can't say what my heart is full of, either. Run over and get your things. Wait. I'll ring for Gilbert. I don't want you to go into the hotel alone. Then you must wire your aunt at once and tell her that you are with me.'

Victoria smiled, but there was no impatience in her amusement at the calm resumption of chaperonage. Families were more or less alike after all.

CHAPTER XX

WHEN Victoria reëntered the Rockingham, followed at a respectful distance by Gilbert in the well-known Vennard livery, the clerk leaned far forward on his elbows and grinned.

‘Found ’em all right, I see. I thought that was the party you was looking for.’

Victoria thanked him, and explained that she was giving up her room, but would pay for it then.

‘Not at all,’ said he decidedly. ‘Anything the house can do for Miss Vennard — any favor we can do at any time is our pleasure.’ He turned to find her key. ‘Hello! Here’s an answer to that millionaire telegram of yours.’ He handed Victoria the envelope and watched with polite curiosity while she ripped it open.

Her heart jumped happily. What a good ending to a perfectly dazzling day! And wasn’t it just like Grandpa to answer at once? He was such an old sport, anyway — and then her fingers grew cold and numb, and the rapt clerk saw the color fade out of her cheeks. The telegram was not from Grandpa. It was signed T. S. Silsby, and read:

Your grandfather died this afternoon. Advise immediate return.

Victoria felt blindly for a chair, and sank into it, staring at the message. She motioned to the

anxious-eyed clerk, who came leaping toward her.

‘Bad news — what? Isn’t that tough!’ His round face was wry with true concern. ‘Here! Front! Get Miss Vennard some ice water. Want to go up to your room, Miss?’

‘Oh, yes, I suppose so,’ she answered dully.

Then Gilbert drove her back to her aunt’s home. Although it was not the season for open fires, Miss Vennard had lighted a true hearth fire, to burn an offering to the return of Victoria. It twinkled a merry welcome in the gleaming brasses as she came in. The whole room seemed to be glowing with warmly diffused hospitality. The richness and beauty of it enveloped her as she stumbled to an armchair and curled up like a little girl in its cushiony depths. She could not cry. She could just ache and ache with the hurt of it. Love, grief, and overwhelming remorse struggled to split her breast with their conflict. She was too weary to think, too heartsick to live.

When Miss Vennard came down dressed for dinner, Victoria held out the crumpled telegram and buried her face in the back of the chair.

‘Why, has something terrible happened?’ She held her lorgnette to read.

Miss Vennard was wise enough to know that trite words of sympathy and empty truisms would only wound and annoy, so she took Victoria’s limp hand between her satiny palms and mercifully said nothing. It was diabolical of Fate to devise such an ending for their beautiful day.

After a while Victoria allowed herself to be led up to her room, bathed with lavender water, and

wrapped up in a silk robe on the day bed. It was good to be taken care of.

An hour later, when a late dinner was announced, Victoria was dressed. She was emotional in anger, but a stoic in her grief. She remembered how Grandpa hated a parade of sorrow, and he would be the last one to wish her to spoil her aunt's dinner. For there was a feast prepared, with candles and bonbons and mysterious favors at Victoria's place, tied with tissue and bright ribbons. Victoria was still too much of a child to resist a little squeal of surprise. At her aunt's direction she opened a small package, and the girl of twenty-two forgot death in the gleam of a large ruby set with diamonds. It was hung on a slender chain, which Victoria fastened around her neck with trembling fingers. And then she untied a velvet box containing a dinner ring of three square-cut sapphires. She clasped her hands and held her breath in reluctant delight. 'I am positively shameless even to look at these lovely things when Grandpa is dead — and how can I ever thank you?' She smiled through her tears in a pathetic wish to laugh and cry.

'This would please your grandfather, dear. Didn't he want to see his little girl happy rather than sad? I have an idea that he is very happy right now. He wants to see his little girl decked out in jewels to celebrate the greatest day in his life. Do you understand me, dear?'

'Yes, Aunt Amelia, in a way. But it's something I can't think about. I don't know how. Will you excuse me if I don't eat?'

'Now, listen to me, Victoria. Death is not so far away from me but that we are beginning to be friends. I know how your grandfather feels. He wants you to eat a good dinner, because too much emotion will make you ill. This has been a trying day for you. And he says not to talk about anything but pins and rings and ancestral gewgaws while we are eating.'

Victoria looked at her watch.

'And he doesn't want us to think about trains until you are ready to go. The next one is at about nine, so it won't do a mite of good to hurry. If it will relieve your mind, I'll just tell you that everything is arranged. You must have had a tiny little nap. Didn't you?'

'Perhaps so. I was nearly dead.'

'And while you were resting, Gilbert went down and got the drawing-room for you and Huldah for to-night. She will take better care of you than I could, and can come home on the morning train.'

'You are so good.' Victoria's eyes filled.

'Look at that ruby through your tears! Quick, before they fall!'

And again youth forgot death for a minute. She gazed down at the spot of cardinal on her breast and then at the gorgeous ring on her smooth brown hand.

'I can't imagine why you should give them to me. It's like a fairy tale, till I think of Grandpa. How could you give them up?'

'Just an old lady's vanity. I like to remember how much I looked like you when I used to wear

them. There will be more, dear, but I thought these would help you to bear to-night.'

'More? Why — why — I never had a ring before in my life, except a little opal which was Mother's, and too small for me. I guess nobody ever thought of it. I suppose Hastings was going to get me a ring.' Her face clouded.

'I think I should wait and think the Lawrence boy over, dear. There's plenty of time. Don't — don't rush into it till you are sure. When he comes, there will be no mistake. There is a very old pearl necklace, the color of satin and old lace, which I should like to see you wear on your wedding day. The Vennard brides have always worn it, except your mother. It will help me to forgive myself about her if I can see the Vennard pearls on your wedding dress.'

'Goodness! You'd think we were queens! I almost can't bear your being so good to me.'

'It is just because you are the last of our family. It is pleasant to be the one to give them to you, but they are your legacy from your own people.'

Victoria was deeply impressed. 'I didn't realize that you claimed me at all — or cared what happened to me.'

'We were not quite as heartless as that. We knew that you were comfortably provided for — in fact, your grandfather refused Victor's offer to support you. The legacy would have come to you after my death, but I never should have known you had you not come in search of your people. I may have sent for you — I don't know. I

often wondered if you would come — if you were a true Vennard at heart.'

'At first I just plain ran away.' (Wishing not to sail under false colors for a second, however becoming those colors might be.) 'Then I thought it was about time I knew something about my father's people.'

'In justice to him, dear, I ought to tell you that he was forbidden to go to Hamlin, by your mother's father, so forgive him.'

'I have been unfair too,' said Victoria gravely.

Just before Huldah and Gilbert took Victoria to the train, there came a second telegram, which made all the difference in the world.

Grandpa got your wire all right. Lots of love and sympathy.

UNCLE MATTHEW

When she said good-bye with her arms tight around her new-found aunt and promised again and again to come back soon, it seemed as if she had discovered more than her father's aristocratic background, more than love and sympathy and a thrilling resemblance to one of her own blood: Victoria had really found herself.

CHAPTER XXI

As the train pulled into Hamlin, Victoria caught a glimpse of Uncle Matthew's upturned face, anxiously scanning the coaches. She warmed with a great surging affection for him as she saw how pale he was. Blue pouches under his eyes showed through the fog and smoke. Then she felt herself lifted down from the step and pressed hard against his coat in a short, clumsy embrace.

The presence of Huldah was explained as three sleepy faces shook with the racking vibrations of the taxi.

Harriet met them at the door. She described a stiff semicircle with her arms, and Victoria stepped inside. It was hard, but she had turned over a new leaf in the long wakeful hours of the night.

'I think Maggie is ready for us,' and Harriet led the way to the dining-room.

'We thought you'd be getting in about now,' explained Matthew, rubbing his hands. He was famished, but he repressed his usual 'A—ah' at the smell of coffee.

'There was hardly any question about it, was there, Matthew, since we received a wire that she would be on that train?'

Matthew's brave attempt at conversation was snubbed by his wife's logic.

Was it that the fact of Grandpa's death was too big for utterance, or did those alien ears

in the kitchen set a watch upon the family lips?

Oatmeal . . . with Grandpa lying dead! Victoria turned faint and left the table.

Matthew and Harriet found her in the parlor, head pressed against the window that framed the Big House. But no intensity of gaze could quicken that still, white pile into a semblance of life. It loomed monstrously white like a new sepulcher out of the chill gray dawn. The high narrow lids were drawn as if by death itself, and there was that look of blank, inarticulate grief which comes to the faces of dogs and houses whose masters have gone away.

That was why they couldn't mention Grandpa! They were waiting for the Big House to speak first.

Matthew took a sharp, husky breath behind her. 'Victoria, there is something that we—your aunt wants to tell you something.'

'I know what you are going to say,' Victoria burst out, 'and I don't wonder it cuts off your wind.' She turned and smiled at them both. 'I've thought about it all night long. I've known about the will for years. Hannah told me.'

Matthew's eyes bulged and the color came flooding back into his neck, mottling his cheeks and swelling the veins in his temples.

'For Heaven's sake, Matthew, get yourself a cigar!' This from Harriet in a voice like the splitting of an ice jam.

Victoria had a horrible suspicion that she was going to sound ridiculously noble. Her old self

laughed wickedly, but conscious Vennard made her dare to go on. 'I know just how unfair it must seem to you to have Grandpa leave the property to me. He had his reasons, but he really loved his family better than himself. We all know that. What he did was partly because he wanted to make up to my mother in his gorgeous old way. I want you to believe that what I am going to say is for Grandpa — it's what he'd like to have done, I am sure.'

'For God's sake, stop her, Harriet!' Matthew waved an infuriated arm at his wife. Her face looked frozen, and she made no attempt to interrupt. Matthew went over to the window and gazed at the Big House, chewing feverishly at his unlighted cigar.

'Please listen, Uncle Matthew! Can't you see, for Heaven's sake, that I am trying to do the right thing? You aren't making it a bit easy.' Victoria's voice broke, but she hurried on. 'Grandpa didn't think, when he made that will, that outsiders, the whole town, would have to know. He didn't realize how they would talk. It would kill him to have our business discussed on the Hill.'

'He should have thought of that before,' Harriet slipped in quietly.

'Well, he didn't,' said Matthew, wheeling on her.

'We've got to keep the town from talking, that's all,' said Victoria.

'Matthew,' came Harriet's voice with a strange, pleading note in it, 'please tell her.'

‘Go on, Vic,’ commanded Matthew.

‘I’m just going to propose a perfectly sensible bluff on the town. We’ve got to pretend that we were in favor of what Grandpa did — that it was done with your consent. We’ll all three move over to the Big House — and I’ll go on living with you just as we do here. We’ve got to stick together in this or we’ll be picked to shreds by every gossip on the Hill.’

Victoria stopped on an excited note and looked from one to the other.

‘Tell her, Harriet,’ said Matthew, and left the room.

‘The Big House is sold. Your grandfather sold it before he died.’ Harriet looked away before Victoria’s wide, unbelieving eyes.

Victoria felt mountains of virtue tumbling about her head. ‘So you waited until I had told you my fatuous scheme! I suppose he was angry at my going away and sold the house to punish me? It sounds too small for Grandpa.’

‘It’s true, however, that he refused to sign the deed until he heard about you.’

‘What about me?’

‘Your going away without leaving a message for him — not even good-bye.’

‘Don’t! How can you?’

Harriet paused. ‘He went into a rage, of course, and it was too much for his heart.’

‘You mean — that — I killed him?’

‘You are at liberty to —’

Both women jumped as a curtain ring scraped. Matthew stood in the door gripping the portières

with both hands. He steadied himself and pointed an accusing finger at his wife.

'Harriet Price, you stop torturing that child! I heard what you said, and it's a damn lie!' He advanced into the room, and there was real dignity about him as he faced his wife. 'I sent Victoria a wire that her grandfather had received her message . . . he got it all right, Vic, and he understood. The old man was himself then.'

'You said nothing to me about a wire, Matthew,' said Harriet under her breath.

'No, but I'm going to say something now, and I wish to God I had been man enough to say it before. You've gone just one step too far, and I won't stand for it! Do you hear? I — won't — stand — for it!' He tried to shout, but his voice choked with emotion. 'I heard what you were saying. I didn't want to hear. That's why I went out. I suppose you thought I was running away. You could never understand how a man feels about things. I cleared out to give you a chance. I thought we'd decided to say, "Here now, Victoria, we've stacked the deck against you, but the old man has double-crossed us. Let's start again!"' Matthew dropped into a chair and wiped his purpling brow. 'I've sinned, God knows, but I've sinned through weakness. I lost the Big House through weakness, but I've got just backbone enough left to admit it. I wasn't man enough to stand up for what I knew was right, but I've got decency enough to say I was wrong, and to ask her to forgive me. That's what I do, Vic. I ask your forgiveness.'

'Oh, I do forgive you, Uncle Matthew, dear.' Victoria flew to him and tried to reach her arms around his heaving shoulders. 'You are sure Grandpa understood my message? That's all I care about now.'

'Absolutely. He didn't go into the rage that killed him till after he knew you were just the same little Vixen. You see, he had been told insinuating things about you, and he got it into his head that you had done something like your mother. He was in no condition to sign, but that rat Silsby made him. He wasn't himself, but he signed the deed and the Big House is gone.'

'The money is all hers — she can buy it back again if she wants it,' said Harriet, narrowing her eyes at Matthew.

Matthew rose, his pompous blue stare meeting Harriet's dark squint. It was Price against Lawrence — the old feud laid bare. He walked slowly over to Harriet. 'Yes, the dirty scheme failed! You know why? Because, when the Prices set out to beat the Lawrences at their own game, they always do it up brown. Who but my father would have thought of dying in order to get the best of you? He was a real man, and it's a damn shame he had such a couple of lumps as Bert and me!'

CHAPTER XXII

THE BIG HOUSE wore a pre-funereal air of aloofness which added to its mighty dignity. A sphinx-like expression crept over its mouth and eyes, as the front lids drooped and the big black walnut door opened and shut a thousand times with portentous decorum.

Matthew, Harriet, and Victoria made separate silent pilgrimages to the long parlor where Grandpa lay. Some one had to be there all the time with Lena, whose sense of propriety forbade her staying unchaperoned in the house with death. It was Victoria who removed the palm and purple streamers from the doorbell, and ordered fresh violets to be placed there on each of the mornings before the funeral.

The Hill was awed by the passing of its dictator, but under its cloak of conventional mourning, it was restless with subdued excitement. Everybody knew that the Big House had been sold a few hours before James Price's death. Everybody cautiously connected Victoria's disappearance with both the sale and the sudden death. How they came to know is one of the mysteries. Perhaps in a closed corporation like the Hill, the atmosphere becomes freighted with inbred vibrations, and each house extends invisible super-sensitized antennæ, which pick up the delicate spirit of messages before the letter of those messages has been broadcast — a sort of radio-active community mind reading.

Behind inscrutable shutters the Hill watched and listened, breathless for developments. Soon everybody knew that the Price estate had gone to outsiders — a family 'from away' would dwell but not reign in the Big House.

There were certain loyal friends who felt sincere sorrow at the passing of the old régime, and the personal loss of James Price was deeply felt throughout the town. But although Matthew was now the senior Price, he would always be just James Price's eldest son, living over in the 'Other House.' A royal family in exile is not a royal family inside its castle moat. It was the end of the Price supremacy on the Hill. Everybody felt it. Nobody said it in so many words.

And there were some who were glad; not meanly glad of a neighbor's downfall, but involuntarily exultant at the drama of defeat. For Hamlin was a democracy, and democratic blood does not throb with the sentiment, 'The king is dead — long live the king!' Deep down in the republican heart there is a leaping pulse which cries, 'The king is dead — who knows but I — I may yet be king?'

However divided was sentiment in regard to the downfall of the Prices, the old families on the Hill showed a clannish hostility to the idea of invasion by outsiders. It was desecration. The Big House in the hands of impostors!

This Mr. Gale from up-river somewhere should pay dearly for his Churchill Street address, and Mrs. Gale, if there were one, she should pay too.

There was a truce declared by unspoken mu-

tual consent over at the 'Other House,' and on the surface life went on as normally as before. All three recognized that internal warfare was footless when they were threatened from without. Victoria's generous plan for hoodwinking the Hill, coinciding dramatically with Harriet's old secret hope, had made an effect upon her in spite of their bitter words. Harriet was human.

They were three against the attacking tongues of the town, and a break in their ranks would be fatal. And they were three against Bertram's house. That was inevitable, although conventional decency would obtain until after the funeral.

Victoria drew scattered details of her grandfather's last day from Matthew, who was obscure because he had not been over there until the end; from Harriet, who was guarded for reasons of self-preservation; and from Miss Sullivan, who was naturally taciturn, but who told what she knew in this case.

Negotiations for the sale of the Big House must have been concluded with the party of the second part, and merely awaited James Price's signature. Silsby and Harriet went to work on that, early in the morning following Victoria's departure. Silsby had made little headway with his financial arguments until a skillful hint from Harriet implied that Victoria had run away to do what her mother did. Then a mind too old and tired and sick to withstand such concentrated harassing had given in to passionate, unreasoning rage.

Bert had got wind of the gathering in his

father's room, and, thinking that something must be up, added his presence at a very inopportune time for Silsby and Harriet. He had retarded matters greatly by throwing in his moral strength with his father against the sale of the Big House. Harriet had to tell him in so many words that the Big House would never be Ernest's, and Victoria could imagine how Aunt Harriet relished the telling. Then Bert's anger against both his father and Harriet added to that emotional conflagration in which Grandpa was finally consumed.

Having signed the deed of the Big House, Grandpa listened to Harriet's poisonous advice and demanded his will. The persistent pestering of Silsby and the neatly timed innuendoes of Harriet, having smouldered in the back of Grandpa's brain, now burst into a mad flame. He hurled his curses upon Victoria and his little Emily alike.

Victoria's fate rested upon the stroke of a pen. The door opened after a discreet knock, and Lena stepped in. She placed a paper in Grandpa's hand and as he puzzled over the writing, which was hers, she whispered: 'It's a message from Miss Victoria. I just took it over the 'phone, Mr. Price. I'll read it to you, sir.' And while the astonished company were too stunned to stop her, she read distinctly:

DEAREST GRANDPA: Forgive me for running away. I am at the Rockingham, Portsmouth, thinking about Mother and what you told me. If you want me wire.

VIXEN

The anger that had driven him to sell the Big House and send for his will was a passing ripple on a summer sea, compared with the storm which now broke. The frightened Lena fled from the terrible consequences of her first act of insubordination. From bellowing curses to pitiful wails for forgiveness and agonized cries for Victoria and little Emily — then back to black cursing, but his curse rested upon those silent conspirators, awed by the magnitude of his rage. Suddenly he grew calm. He had caught sight of Silsby fingering the will. 'Tear it up, you damned skunk! Why don't you burn it? Sullivan — has — the — duplicate.' He enunciated very carefully, for these were his last words and he knew why his speech was growing thick.

CHAPTER XXIII

A STEADY stream of friends came for short perfunctory calls, with kindly offers of stilted sympathy, tedious proposals of quite unnecessary assistance, ill-concealed curiosity.

When Hastings came in, Harriet pointedly left him alone with Victoria. She allowed him to kiss her briefly, and then drew away from him and curled up in a chair.

'Tough luck, Vic — awfully seedy luck, dear.'

'Thanks, Hasty.'

'Well?'

'What? What is there to say? It's — it's — I can't talk about it, Hasty.'

'I don't mean him. You know me for hating hypocrisy, Vic. I'd like you to know that I am decently sorry for you, and awfully surprised at his death. It was rotten luck your not being here.'

'I know — please don't.'

'What got me, though, was your going away.'

'Why?'

'Well, according to Hamlin extras, you had run away to see the world incognito — you had eloped with some low-born acquaintance, traceable to High School influence — you had gone to New York to work as chauffeur to a millionaire, who would sell you into slavery or something. On the whole, we didn't expect you back.'

'You know why I came back.'

'Oh, yes, that changed things, of course.'

'It changed everything for me. I loved him more than anybody.'

'I guess you are the only person who really did love him — in the family, I mean. As far as the town goes, they're all shot up over it. The general run of people are boot-lickers, aren't they?'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, the whole silly town going to halfmast because the man who squeezed more money out of the State than any one has passed out.'

'That is very unkind of you, Hastings.'

'Oh, I wasn't meaning it personally. I was just thinking aloud, that the people are serfs at heart. They love to be bullied and snubbed.'

'I am not interested in that now, Hasty. Grandpa knew that I loved him. That's all I care about. I'm heartsick.'

'Of course you are. There's no use pussy-footing with you when every one knows it. I call it a dirty Irish trick, the way they Jewed you out of the Big House.'

'Quite an international intrigue!'

Hastings didn't see it at first, and then he laughed. 'Snappy as ever, aren't you? But, honestly, everybody thinks so.'

'Then everybody can mind his business.'

'Including me?'

'Yes.'

'Thanks. That lets me out. I was merely expressing the indignation of a person who has a right to an opinion on your affairs, and I must say you win the blue necktie when it comes to getting me wrong!'

'I'm sorry.'

'Well, you'd better be. I came over all cocked and primed to let the episode of your recent joy-ride pass without editorial comment, as it were — although I have put in two of the damndest days I ever lived through.'

'Why, Hasty, were you so worried about me?' Victoria was truly touched, and showed it unmistakably in her softened voice.

'Yes, of course I was worried; but I don't mean that. I don't suppose you have the least idea how the thing looked, have you? You didn't think. I realize that. But, good God, you never think about any one but yourself.'

'You're wrong there, Hasty.'

'You don't care a hang about me or my family.'

'I don't care a hang about your family, but I — I like you.'

'You "like" me! I guess that's just about the size of it. Well, I love you, and I wish from the bottom of my heart that I didn't.'

'So do I.'

'That's a help! I love you enough to stand up to my mother and father for two solid days, while they tried to point out to me what a hell of a life I'd lead if I married you.'

'I think they were right, Hasty.'

'I don't. And what I was going to say was this. I'm here to forgive you for lighting out and leaving me to bear the brunt of it.'

'Leaving you? Why begin to assume the hellish responsibilities before you are married?' Victoria lighted a cigarette.

'Gosh! You can be unpleasant. I mean having to stand what everybody said, in addition to the family.'

'For Heaven's sake, what did they say? I wasn't gone three days. Isn't this town priceless?'

'I'll ignore the chance for an unkind pun at the expense of your family, and merely remark that you'd be wrathful if you knew, or rather cared, what they did say. Our gang, I mean, not the regular fans.'

'I'm interested,' remarked Victoria.

'Well, everybody said that you and I had had a split.'

'What nonsense!'

'Not if something you said to Marjorie Hale was true.'

'Oh, Lord!'

'I'd like to know if you gave Marjorie *carte blanche* to select me another consort.'

'Marjorie's crazy.'

'But you said something of the sort. Marjorie's no liar.'

'It seems a million years ago, but I guess a million years is like unto a day in the kingdom of Hamlin. I said you could go to her silly picnic alone. Maybe I said you could give the girls a treat, but my impression is that Marjorie said it. She's getting to be worse than her mother. How could you be so sensitive as to wreck two whole days on that?'

'Oh, that wasn't all. But you say you don't care what people say.'

'Fortunately, no.'

'Maybe it's fortunate for you, but darned unfortunate for the one who has to put up with it on your account. I was made to feel like the jilted lover, and I honestly thought there might be some truth in it. And it didn't help matters any to have Aunt Harriet running over every other minute to know if I'd heard from you.'

'As if I'd send you a wireless *en route*!'

'As if you'd consider me at all! I grant it was ridiculous.'

'I truly didn't think, Hasty, and I am sorry.'

There was a rich, vibrant note in Victoria's voice which always shook Hastings. He leapt from his chair and threw himself onto the arm of Victoria's. He tried to draw her to him, but she was established for ease, not embrace.

'Oh, sit down, Hasty, for goodness' sake! I don't want you to kiss me.'

'Why?'

'Because I don't. Haven't you learned yet that there is one point not open to argument?'

'You don't love me.'

'No.'

'You don't intend to marry me, then?'

'I am afraid not, Hasty. I hate to say it now, but perhaps it is just as well. No — I cannot marry you.'

'Since when?' Hastings sat forward, almost wringing the hands that clutched each other hard, and his eyes were bright with unshed tears. 'Since when?'

'Why — yesterday, I suppose.'

'You mean that just because you have got the

whole estate you can't bother with small stuff like me?'

'Oh!' Victoria's gasp was sharp with horror. 'How could you be capable of such a thought? How perfectly disgusting of you, Hasty! What do you suppose that has to do with love?'

'I don't know,' answered Hastings sheepishly.

'Besides,' Victoria went on, her voice full of scorn, 'I'd like to know by what possible authority you were told about that will. It strikes me that you had better wait until after the funeral before discussing the will. You'd think the only thing Grandpa ever did was to make a will. Oh, yes, he did another equally interesting thing. He died, so the will could take effect. Gee, I hate money!'

'You won't,' said Hastings quietly.

'No, probably not. But I hate what money does to people, and I give you my word that if I find that it is getting me, I'll give the whole business away. I'm sick of it.'

'Vic, will you forgive me for saying that caudish thing? I love you all the more when you blaze away like this. You're white, Vic, and I ought to be kicked for saying what I did. But people do put such devilish notions in your head, and if you're kind of raw, anyway, they stick. I'm shot, Vic. I'm not myself. You see, I was afraid all the time — from something Aunt Harriet said — and yet I hoped. And now that I know, I just cannot believe it. I can't give you up, Vic. I can't live without you.'

'Hasty, I can't tell you how beastly I feel to hurt you like this. You've got to believe it. I

didn't realize that — that it meant so much to you. We play and fight so much that we haven't had time to know the best in each other. I don't call a sudden burst of kissing really knowing each other. We have been scrapping and making up mainly, and that's no way to live. I came to realize quite suddenly that I didn't love you the way I ought.'

'There isn't somebody else that you do love? Will you tell me that?'

'No, there is absolutely no one, and I doubt if there ever will be. I guess your family was right. You'd have a hell of a life with me. I'm the kind who makes people unhappy. The Devil himself is in me, though nobody knows how hard I have tried to get him out. I'm frightfully lonely. I don't believe I can live without you, either. I don't mean marriage, but oh, Hasty, I need a friend. You and I have always been such pals — can't we go on that way? I get awfully provoked with you, and you get disgusted with me, but I need you. I want to know that you're right across the street, ready to come when I call you. Couldn't we — isn't there enough to our friendship to leave us that?'

Hastings stood up abruptly. He steadied his lips, and then answered in his most casual manner: 'You take away everything, and then ask me if there is enough left to patch up a working friendship. It isn't good arithmetic, my dear — and it's faulty psychology.'

'But, Hasty —'

He was out in the hall, and the front door slammed for answer.

CHAPTER XXIV

THERE seemed every reason on earth for not going down to Uncle Bert's house to dinner *en famille*. It was like the Prices to seal a fermenting jar with an airtight cover, and Victoria understood that it was for the Hill, and that Flora's invitation to the Other House was notification that Bert and Flora would stand with the family. It was in line with the Price tradition: let appearances be served, and motives will take care of themselves.

Bertram's house was a block or two down Churchill Street from the Big House. It had not so impressive an exterior as Matthew's, having been built during the awkward age of American architecture, but it was typical of Hamlin. At least seventy-five per cent of Hamlin houses were cut after the same pattern, and were commonly known as 'railroad houses,' on account of their trains of ells and tall, raking chimneys. Evidently it had been customary to add an ell whenever the family increased or the woods declared a dividend. The high, pitched roofs of Monson slate bristled with lightning rods. They had narrow faces with disproportionately large plate-glass windows, flat, uninteresting north sides, containing halls, stairs, and bathrooms, while all life was concentrated in the long, high-posted, wooden-shuttered living- and dining-rooms, whose normal sides were bulged out in bow windows to catch every available angle of precious sun.

Bert's long living-room was quite as handsomely furnished as Matthew's: the same profusion of Oriental rugs, old mahogany, good prints and statuary, rare glass and odd brasses. But there was a difference in the books. While Matthew owned the required number of standard sets to supply the cultural content of a well-furnished New England room, they were too obviously selected for their bindings, and these too jealously guarded from dust by glass doors to strike an intellectual note.

When Victoria was a little girl, the doors were always kept locked, and when she asked to look at the pictures in the rose-and-gold Dante, she was told to go right up to her own room and get one of her own little books.

It was over at Grandpa's that Victoria had indulged her taste for strange reading. His books were nice and dingy, worn so much at the corners and along the bindings that an extra jerk or smudge from the eager clutch of strong little brown hands didn't even show. And Victoria loved to watch the slanting rays of the afternoon sun burnish the dull gold letters, and turn the rusty brown leather to bronze.

Uncle Bert's books had a little of that intimate quality as if some one had loved to handle them. They warmed the atmosphere of an otherwise rather hostile house for Victoria. Bert was an odd man. He had a real love of music and poetry and pictures when he was young and had taken his post-graduation trip abroad with his parents in a spirit of classical adventure. Marriage had

breathed a blight upon that self, and only a wistful missing of such things remained. He would turn to the poetry page of the *Literary Digest* and snatch a bit of half-understood pleasure, or carry in his pocket a verse cut from the *Boston Transcript* till it crumbled. Bert glimpsed his own potentialities, but had lost the art of being himself. It was easier to conform.

Matthew was content to lock the doors on the classics. He had managed to pass his English Lit., and felt as little interest in them as he did in his defunct chemistry and math. He read his Oppenheim and *Saturday Evening Post*, and any new novel which was sufficiently condemned by his wife to excite his curiosity. Matthew thought about himself a great deal, but never analytically. Bert critically analyzed himself, but thought and dreamed only of Ernest. In the son must come to fruition the blighted buds which had never bloomed for the father. There reposed his only hope of happiness. Bert's sentiment for Victoria was that accorded to the cause of blasted hopes.

Ernest met Uncle Matthew and his wife and niece at the door. His evening clothes signified the character of the occasion. Bertram and Matthew were also in dinner clothes, while Flora and Harriet were gowned in new, semi-evening dresses of dead black.

Victoria's gold charmeuse cut through the dark like an arrow of sunlight. The question of mourning for her had been brought up and tabled. It was something she simply did not believe in. Aunt Amelia had planted a seed of philosophy, and she

thought of her with pride and gratitude as she fastened on her ruby pendant.

'Hello, Ernie,' said Victoria, laying her hand lightly in his. 'It's nice of you all to have us down.'

Ernest dropped her hand quickly and swept her with an insolently appraising look. His eye caught the ruby and he flicked it with a daring finger.

'Some doll — what? No *crêpe*-hanger about you, is there?'

Ernest was always capable of poor taste in his remarks, but this hurt. It wasn't a bit like Ernest, and Victoria preferred his usual half bantering-brother, half lover-like attitude, annoying as that had been at times. Then they all exchanged stiff little speeches of greeting and welcome. It was the first family gathering after the funeral. Of course it was hard for them, thought Victoria, and exerted her most charming self.

Dinner was announced as soon as Bert had finished his cocktail. He liked to prolong his, while Matthew figured that if he tossed his first one off, there would be time for a second. With the Prices, a cocktail was but a formal preliminary to food, and was not hailed with Dionysian rites.

National prohibition had wrought great changes on the Hill. Houses which were congenitally 'dry' when Maine was a pioneer prohibition State, now boasted of their Canadian contraband and demonstrated their domestic concoctions. And table conversation, once such an art on the Hill, when a dinner might include the Honorable

James Price, Judge Hale, Doctor Hammett, and Professor Smyth, had now declined, not in volume, but in quality.

Said Victoria, in a moment of scorn, 'Washtub liquor breeds washtub conversation.' She had a brain and tongue which did not require priming with alcohol in order to function, and her more or less witty remarks always went the rounds. She had coined an epigram (very consciously, be it confessed). When repartee had descended to recipe, she said, 'Prohibition is the mother of invention.'

Victoria had been brought up in a family in which it was considered vulgar to discuss the food on the table with guests. It was understood that the house provided suitable food, and to partake was to approve. The same rule always applied to liquor. It was taken or refused as a matter of taste. Perhaps the perfect correlation which existed between the Price supply and demand contributed to the dignity with which it was served.

Ernest and Victoria drank to the family under Harriet's disapproving eye. For the Prices had their 'antis' too. Harriet's firm abstinence was more for dampening effect upon Matthew's naïve enjoyment than as a personal protest. Her shoulders had risen a full inch, and her whole frame seemed to contract and lengthen as she moved out to dinner on Bertram's arm.

Over the soup there was no reason for discussing the new color of Flora's father's house, when there was just one house filling each mind and heart that night. Victoria wondered how long

they could evade the subject of their thoughts, and, knowing the family, put it as far as dessert.

Suddenly Ernest said, 'Rus Bartlett says you missed it not going up on the train with them.'

'Missed what?' asked Victoria.

'Oh, I dunno. The Fox twins were on the train, and I guess a merry time was had by all. They routed the porter out and he got them ginger ale at midnight, much to the peeve of Pa Bartlett.'

'That must have been thrilling.'

'Oh, don't get snooty. Of course it sounds dull to you. All of us can't get quite the kick out of life that you can.'

'Your Aunt Harriet says you had an interesting time in Portsmouth,' inserted Flora cautiously.

'Interesting, yes.' Victoria did not want to talk to them about Aunt Amelia.

'Romantic, I'd say,' put in Ernest. 'Digging up a real aunt, rich as mud, and likely to die at that. There's something sickening about your luck, Vic.'

'Who said she's likely to die?' Victoria retorted.

'Nobody, old fire-eater. Didn't you say yourself that she was frightfully old?'

'You certainly gave me that impression,' said Harriet quickly.

'Yes, she is old, I suppose, but I have no reason to regard her death as lucky — nor any death, for that matter.' She looked pointedly at Ernest, then added, 'She is my grandfather's sister, you know.'

'Seems funny, your having another grandfather,' grinned Ernest, changing the unpleasant drift.

'You had two. It's the right biological number, isn't it?'

'I know,' argued Ernest, not being interested in the subject, but finding it safe. 'Everybody's related on the Hill. That's different. I mean skipping out like that and returning with a whole family. Like picking a bunch of relatives out of a silk hat.'

'The relationship has always existed,' said Victoria, 'and the "bunch of relatives" consists of one aunt.'

'What does seem strange,' said Flora hastily, reading danger signals flaming in Victoria's cheeks, 'is that this aunt of yours hasn't made the slightest effort to look you up. As Bert was saying, if any one made the first advance, it should have come from the Vennards.'

'Why any more than from us?' demanded Matthew quickly. 'I guess things got pretty hot between both the old men.'

Harriet turned to Matthew in blank amazement. 'Well, Matthew, do I actually believe my ears? Are you going to say that the trouble was our fault? That's the very last thing I should expect from a Price.'

'Feuds are not eternal, Harriet,' said Matthew with dignity. 'We made up with the Lawrences, although — let's see, whose fault was it, anyway?'

It was Harriet who led in the laughter, lest the

conversation be construed as unbecoming for a dinner table. 'You know very well what we mean, Matthew,' she said, addressing her husband, but directing her conversation to Victoria. (The 'we' amused Victoria. It would always be 'we Prices' when it came to Price versus Vennard.) 'We are Victoria's guardians, or were, and we resent any slight put upon her.' Then, turning to Victoria, 'We have always felt that your father's family should have done something for you when you were a child.'

'Grandpa wouldn't allow it. My father was prevented from claiming me, by the Prices, not the Vennards.'

'Oh, of course, if you have been listening to their story —' said Bert. 'Pretty time to start influencing you.'

'I don't understand. Please explain.'

'Well,' answered Bert sharply, 'I should think Grandpa's will would make you decide whether you are a Price or a Vennard.'

'You see, my dear,' put in Harriet, resenting Bert's manner, 'you have just accepted very costly presents from Miss Vennard. Do you realize that that is a real ruby you have on?'

'I didn't suppose it was glass. I am afraid you haven't a very clear conception of my father's family,' she added, battling with a growing desire to let them have a few truths.

'And I think her sending flowers for Grandpa's funeral was the — the queerest taste after all these years,' said Flora.

'She can afford to be queer,' answered Victoria.

'Aunt Flora was not referring to the extravagant number of roses, although that was not quite our way, but to her using that sentimental means to win you, my dear.' And Harriet puckered her lips tight.

Victoria was praying. 'Please, please God, help me to hold my tongue this once, and the next time I'll be able to do it alone.'

When she spoke, her voice was low and cool. 'It was a great lady's way of asking Grandpa's forgiveness.'

'Forgiveness?' echoed Flora. 'Why should she wish to be forgiven? She didn't know your grandfather.'

'But she felt that the Vennards had been unkind to his child.'

'Oh, to you, you mean?'

'No. They felt that my father had married beneath him. They never forgave him, nor recognized my mother.'

Uncle Matthew choked on one of his reddest, naughtiest chuckles.

'Matthew!' said Harriet sharply. It was as good as a slap on the back, and he stopped coughing. 'Perhaps you can laugh at an insult to your sister. I cannot.'

'I can't help it, Harriet,' spluttered Matthew, his watering eyes seeking Victoria's. 'It's so funny — the Vennards being ashamed of the Prices. Aunt Sarah would resent it for you. Can't you see her in her best passementerie, when poor little Emily —'

'I didn't say "ashamed," Uncle Matthew,' cor-

rected Victoria soberly. She was not going to laugh with him as he expected. She would preserve her hard-fought-for dignity at all costs. 'The Vennards merely felt about the Prices as the Prices felt about the Vennards. They had never heard of each other, therefore each assumed that the other was inferior. Both families were to blame in the same way, and Miss Vennard is big enough to admit it.'

'All right, then,' said Ernest. 'When she dies, we'll send her forty dollars' worth of roses and call it quits.'

'Sometimes you manage to be even more crude than usual,' returned Victoria.

Bertram and Flora winced.

'I thought if I didn't say something, we'd wrangle over that all night,' explained Ernest irritably.

'Wrangle is hardly the word, Ernest,' objected Harriet, and Flora drew a sharp breath of annoyance. 'I think with Ernest, that we had better drop the subject.'

It was unusual for Matthew to break a family silence, but he spoke up quickly. 'I'm curious to know about the new people. Who knows anything about them? I don't.'

'Every one seems to know about them but you,' said Harriet.

'Nobody tells me anything. I have to mess around the club to pick up news about my own business.'

'The Gales are quite uninteresting. Pulp-wood people, of course, from up-river somewhere. They

have made all their money since the war, I hear. I have seen Mr. Gale once and I should judge his wife would be impossible.'

'Have you seen her?' This from Flora in an excited undertone.

'No.'

Then Matthew wanted to know, 'How in thunder do you know she is impossible?'

'Because he is just the type who would have an impossible wife.'

Neither Matthew nor Bert cared to pursue her reasons.

'Shall you call, Harriet?' asked Flora.

'Why should I? What can we have in common? Why establish a relationship which I cannot continue? People don't make neighborhood calls any more.'

'But people will call on them,' persisted Flora, marveling at Harriet's daring stand.

'Let them,' replied Harriet loftily.

'It will seem strange not to be on calling terms with the Big House.'

'My dear Flora, you may call if you wish. I am merely stating my sentiments. I feel, as Dorothy feels, that Churchill Street is the last there is left of the old Hamlin, and the least we can do is to keep it intact.'

Flora had not lived on Churchill Street as a girl, and always vaguely resented its being set aside for the gentry, like an aisle roped off with white ribbons.

'I should think selling the Big House was an odd way of keeping it undefiled,' said she, a little too warmly for a hostess.

‘They’ve got a son. Did you know that, Vic?’ put in Ernest sourly.

The mention of the Big House stirred keen resentment in each heart, but so violently differing were the thought waves it set in motion that the air became freighted with conflict. At the idea of the impending presence of strangers in the Big House, every heart beat faster, some with rage, some with remorse, and some with grief. It would have helped could the family have presented a solid flank of common disapproval.

‘Why, Ernest, dear!’ Flora’s voice took on a special persuasive drawl when she spoke to Ernest, that note of protective sweetness with which mothers try to forestall a sharp answer. ‘You never told us there was a son.’

‘I was telling Victoria,’ he replied.

‘Thanks, Ernie. They don’t interest me.’

‘I heard that they want to take possession at once,’ said Bert, not liking the tone of Victoria’s reply. ‘That means moving Grandpa’s things out, doesn’t it — Victoria?’

It was the most direct reference to her as heir which Bert had been able to make. She was very much embarrassed.

‘Why, yes, Uncle Bert, I suppose so. I — er — we had better get together soon and discuss dividing the things. I want us all to have them — of course,’ she added, examining the pattern of the cloth.

‘I say dibs on the silver on account of the name,’ remarked Ernest with remarkable lack of diffidence. ‘Isn’t that fair, Dad?’

'We'll discuss the silver at a more suitable time,' said Matthew stiffly.

Flora proposed going into the library for coffee.

'Wait a minute, Flo,' said Bert, taking up a spoon and weighing it in his fingers. 'Now that we're on the subject, I should like to make a suggestion to the family, or, rather, to you, Victoria,' he added, raising his eyes to hers. 'We assume that, after the way Ernest's grandfather treated him, you will want to make it up to him in some way. It is what Ernest would have done had things gone on normally.'

'Normally?' Matthew shot this unanswerable question at Bert, and Bert ignored the interruption.

'In fact,' he continued, 'we feel very strongly that on account of what every one will say about the will, and all, we ought to stand absolutely together. You are one of us, Victoria. The environment of a lifetime cannot be cast off in a day. We owe it to Grandpa — to the family — to present an unbroken front.'

Victoria nodded. To what devious purposes had that solid family front been put.

'And,' Bert continued, 'we think on that account, if not on the other I mentioned, that Ernest ought to be put in as manager.'

'Why, Uncle Bert, I never heard of such a thing! Ernest doesn't know any more about the business than I do, and that is practically zero. Besides, he's not through college.'

'I could chuck next year and not miss it,' put in Ernest.

'This is a new idea to me,' said Matthew, puffing his lips, and feeling acutely his authority as Grandpa's eldest son. 'The Prices have never acted as their own agents, and I don't see that this is any time to begin. We weren't aware that Ernest was exactly trained for the job.'

Bert hurled his brother a black look, and addressed Victoria. 'He could study local conditions with Jackson or Miss Sullivan, and then we thought that perhaps he might take a course in estate management somewhere — possibly the Harvard Business School. Ernest doesn't want you to consider this a matter of charity — please understand that. It just struck us as ethical, and possibly good business to have one of the family — a disinterested member handling things after — after Silsby.' Bert turned and looked hard at Harriet until a damp pink had crept up into her hair.

'In other words,' said Ernest, 'Dad thinks it would be more decent if your own cousin was to draw Silsby's fat salary instead of an outsider. But naturally, since you've got the whole cheese, you don't think about the crumbs. We thought maybe it would help in following up that pet wheeze of yours, "the economic distribution of property."' "

His parents looked as though they thought he had said about enough, but to stop him would look like desertion.

'Of course Silsby is going,' said Victoria evenly; 'but don't you think it will be best for us all if

Miss Sullivan takes charge until we can find the right man?’

‘The point is’ — Ernest’s voice broke on a high, shrill note — ‘you’d rather stick that old hen in than me — just because you know she hates me!’ Ernest’s pale face was flushing unevenly and his lower lip quivered as it used to when he and Victoria would clash angry stares.

Flora insisted that it was time for coffee.

CHAPTER XXV

HARRIET was watering a young rubber plant, the pampered offspring of an old family pet, when Victoria came down, an hour late for breakfast. She was greeted by her aunt with an amazing cordiality, almost affection, if it were not too much to imagine. Harriet herself went out into the kitchen to see if Victoria's orange juice were iced. It was a little attention, to be sure, but Victoria was keenly sensitive that morning and it made her very happy.

'I can't get over Bert's proposal to put Ernest in as manager,' mused Harriet aloud, pinching off a dead leaf from her begonia. 'I was going to say that it was just like him, but it was so much more like him than I ever knew him to be that I'm still aghast.'

'It was a poser to me,' Victoria replied, her thoughts playing an amusing *obbligato* to their conversation.

'I thought your uncle got back at him very neatly,' offered Harriet in almost abnormal good humor.

Victoria couldn't recall Matthew's exact repartee, but nodded and remarked that they'd all be on the town inside of a year under the leadership of Ernie.

'Preposterous,' said Harriet, nipping a presuming shoot. Her grim lips moved in playful puckers as she pursued her own meditations. 'I don't know how many times I have thought of

Ernest's face when you declined to answer him. Fortunate for his doting parents that you didn't, I suspect,' she added with satisfaction. 'Victoria, did it strike you that he looked paler and thinner and more namby-pamby than usual?'

'Yes, I thought he was rather pathetic last night . . . poor old Ernie.'

Uncle Matthew was working at his desk. Victoria felt so genial that she decided to smoke, and then remembered the relaxed muscles in Aunt Harriet's face and decided that it might appear ungrateful. She always observed the childhood rule not to speak while her uncle was at his desk, so she quietly read the paper until he made a few final flourishes with his gold-mounted fountain pen, and tucked it away in his inner recesses with an important little grunt. When he swung around, happy, tender smiles wreathed his pink face.

'Well, Vic, you added ten years to my life last night.' Victoria gave him a light kiss on his cheek. 'Made me think of your grandfather, you did. Your aunt spoke of it, too. Say, Vic,' beckoning her closer, 'you made a hit with her, the way you put Ernest in his place. What'd you think of his speaking for the silver before you'd said "go"?''

'Oh, I think the whole business is disgusting. I dread what I know will happen — a lot of pig-gish unpleasantness about Grandpa's things. I don't wonder the Indians take theirs with them. I felt like saying, "The Big House is dead. Go on

over and pick the bones!" Human beings can be awful wolves, can't they?'

'Yup. But at the same time, don't go and tell Bert and Flora to go on over. There'd be nothing left.'

Victoria had never discussed Bert and Flora so frankly before. Now she felt the solid ground of approval supporting her. She was suddenly in league with Aunt Harriet and Uncle Matthew in their ancient feud with Bert and Flora. Resentment of little Ernest must have had deeper roots than resentment of Vennard. It seemed strange after being on the outside for so many years, just a cynical, amused observer of their petty jealousies. And she realized that she was no mean ally; she swung the balance of power over to the Other House.

A few days ago she thought it would be impossible to live another minute under the same roof with Aunt Harriet. Was it the age-long attitude of the vanquished toward the victor that had made life bearable and this morning even happy? She wondered what sort of reconciliation could have taken place between that husband and wife in their unimaginable upstairs life together.

Ever since that morning when Matthew had loosed himself in wrath he had seemed a bigger man. In family conclave his voice rang with a new note of conscious authority, and on one or two occasions Aunt Harriet had been almost delicate in deferring to him. It was like a buried stratum of life. Only excavating analysis would reveal that story of disruption. Perhaps in

that moment of unveiled conflict the Prices and Lawrences were welded together for the eternal strength of both.

When Marjorie Hale dropped in later, Victoria was still feeling pensively benign. They curled up in their usual corners of the davenport and exchanged remarks concerning each other's clothes. Victoria approved Marjorie's blue flannel, and Marjorie was startled yet quite charmed by Victoria's disregard of mourning. Straightway the room seemed full of people trying to talk at once. Did Vic know that the Gales were going to do the Big House all over? She needn't sniff, for it was a very lucky thing that Churchill Street had got the Gales instead of a Catholic Orphanage. (Marjorie fluffed her yellow bob.) And for Heaven's sake, why was Vic so ungodly blue when she was going to get millions? Was it true that it might not mount up to more than two? And wasn't she going to *do* anything? Go to Paris, get a Rolls-Royce? Was she going to be like Miss Arabella Haines, who had inherited two fortunes and then bought herself a new doormat? Did she know that the Gales had a son, who would certainly get a Rolls-Royce if she didn't?

'Oh, money means more than things to me,' said Victoria desperately. 'I don't want to do the way all Hamlin does, just store up an enormous nest-egg for the next generation. It's like having a house full of beautiful music and keeping your windows shut.'

Marjorie allowed her round blue eyes to pop in registered dumbness. Was it Victoria's idea to

get all her money changed into two-dollar bills and distribute them among the populace? But speaking of the Gale son and heir, was it true that it was all off between Vic and Hasty? Nobody knew whether to ask him anywhere or not. Would Victoria mind if she asked Hasty out to the camp to kind of cheer him up? Victoria did not, and Marjorie flitted out.

Victoria felt a sudden desire to walk, and struck off toward the dam. She wanted to walk miles and miles alone, to free her mind of that stuffy feeling Marjorie had left. More and more of late she was conscious of Marjorie's choking effect. She used to be airy and gay, thought Victoria; now she's sharp and fluttery — like a sparrow hopping from one house to another, collecting mouthfuls of string and hair and lint, and weaving them into an unsightly little nest of gossip. Small-town life was getting Marjorie, as it would probably get her. No, she must guard against that, even though she were lonely and isolated from the family again. Too close coöperation with Aunt Harriet in her feud with Ernest's family would dwarf her soul. Better be lonely than small.

Marjorie had spoiled that snug feeling of belongingness and safety, which had made the morning so different from other mornings. She had spoiled Hamlin, too. But small-town stuff was purely a mental outlook, and it was not the fault of dear old Hamlin. Hamlin would like to be noble and big-minded if her people would only let her.

She stopped and looked off at the low, blunt-topped old hills, scalloping the sky with a trimming of dark, purple blue. All you have to do is to extend your mental limits and your small town becomes the world. Then she sped on with long, swinging strides. A lover of that country always gave salute to an unexpected view of the river. Victoria halted abruptly, as the stream suddenly spread itself at her feet. Nothing small about the river . . . it was an arm of the great ocean, reaching way up into the center of Maine, to cool the hot brow of Hamlin. Think of being stuffy-minded with an open road to the sea at your feet. That's what she needed . . . perspective.

Across the river lay a little town, like a toy village newly painted green and white and set up along the bank, only in a toy village the rows of little white slabs in the churchyard wouldn't outnumber the squat white houses on the street. A sharp New England steeple pierced the blue, and farther on, at the edge of town, a grove of dark green cathedral spires massed a spiky silhouette. 'The Country of the Pointed Firs,' thought Victoria, and her heart swelled with love of it. 'The trouble is' . . . she was gazing across the river . . . 'the trouble is, we get all our ideas from the stuffy insides of houses . . . we ought to think outdoors . . . break down our man-made barriers . . . give the infinite a chance. Now if those people over there should go to church in their woods once in a while, maybe every house would grow a spire, like the trees.'

In that instant's freedom of spirit, Victoria was

refreshed. Her mind had projected itself into the indefinite third person for a second, but the grove of trees reminded her of the Big House, and her mind came back to the personal with a rush of pain and bitterness. She wanted her own darling trees, where her dolls' house used to be, and her secret place, and her fairies' palace, and her own brook, which Grandpa let be hers, and every lily-of-the-valley that bloomed along its mossy bank. Oh, how could she bear to let those horrid people pick her lilies-of-the-valley? But they would, and she would never pick them again. She'd buy them back! She'd take the money from the Big House and add a lot more, because she'd have to bribe the man who bribed Silsby. She wanted it more than anything on earth. Miss Sullivan had said that the Gales would never sell. She'd make them sell. She'd frighten them with that deed snatched from a dying man. And then the estate would be crippled for want of cash. Well, let it be! It was her money. The Big House belonged to her. Her new alliance with Aunt Harriet? She'd be in league with no one. She had always stood alone, and she always would. Why try to encourage a noble outlook? Nobody else had one. She was just small and human, too. She was preaching to herself about the stuffiness of houses, and yet her heart was bound up in a house. It was not easy to get a bigger outlook than your own interests. She was unconsciously hurrying toward the town — toward the office.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE office was in an old brown brick building on the water-front, and looked more like the back entrance to a grain-shed than the headquarters of the Price Estate. The gold letters which had once blazoned the name of 'James A. Price and Son — Lumber' were hardly discernible, but it would have been considered terribly bad taste to repaint them. They stood for age and tradition. They were like the bloom on an antique luster tea-pot.

Victoria met Ernest coming out just as she was about to open the door.

'Well, for goodness' sake! What are you doing here?'

Ernest threw back his head. 'Are you suggesting that I have no right down here?'

'Don't be silly. It was just a fool question. You nearly knocked me down, you see, and I was startled to have you bolt out like that.'

'If you had said "kicked out," you'd have hit it better. Say, I'm darn glad I did run into you. I'd like to ask you a few questions.'

Victoria laid her hand on the knob. 'Shall we go inside?'

'No. Very kind of you to invite me in, but we'll talk better out here.'

'All right, then, let's walk. I'm not going to stand here.'

'You were going in?' asked Ernest sharply.

'Yes, but it wasn't important.'

'Cooking up some more schemes with Sullivan, I suppose.'

Victoria stopped short. 'If you want to walk with me, you can cut that sort of thing, unless you want one of our good old-fashioned battles, right on Water Street.'

'I guess that's what it's coming to,' said Ernest, setting his thin, white jaw, and only emphasizing its weakness.

'What's wrong?'

'Well, I want to know just how much authority Sullivan's got — or you either, for that matter.'

'Sullivan's authority is too complex for little boys to understand,' replied Victoria in a sarcastic drawl, which sent spots of color high into Ernest's cheeks, 'and it would not be quite gentlemanly if I should outline my exact position.'

'If you were a gentleman, I'd knock your conceited head off.'

'And if you were one, I'd dare you to,' said Victoria.

Ernest looked for an instant as if he would waive all conventions, and attack the tall, beautiful woman at his side. But they walked on steadily, and their voices might have been the low banter of lovers, for all the passers-by suspected.

'I tell you what, I'm not going to stand for this Grandpa Price game of yours. I don't give a damn whose name is on that will, or how it got there. I intend to have my share of my grandfather's estate, or there'll be hell to pay. Now, I give you

fair warning, and I've just made it pretty gosh-darn plain in there, that I get my regular allowance when it is due, and I get my share of the principal later, or I'm going to law.'

'For Heaven's sake, let's go home and talk this over,' murmured Victoria. 'Don't make a street brawl of it.'

'It was your own ladylike suggestion,' said Ernest, with a sneer which drove it home to Victoria that this was not one of their old-fashioned skirmishes. This was war.

'I didn't realize your state of mind, Ernest. I was partly in fun.'

'Well, I'm not, and you want to get that straight.'

'Then wait till we get to the park, and we'll hash it over.'

They walked in a biting silence till they came to the green square, full of shaded benches and cooled by the giggling splash of a memorial fountain. And still like lovers on a summer afternoon, they sought the remotest seat.

'Ever sat in the park before?' asked Victoria, trying to lighten the tension with her sense of the ridiculous. 'Two Prices sitting on a park bench, discussing their finances! We might be a nursemaid and a policeman, Ernie. Put your arm around me. Wouldn't the family die?'

Ernest drew back and smiled in derisive applause at her humor. 'I want to know,' he said, 'by what authority Sullivan refused to pay me my allowance.'

'I don't know, except that everything gets

held up till after the will is probated and the appraisers have been through things. You'll get it all in a lump, and it will seem so much more.'

'Oh, yes, it will seem like almost two dollars to you. You make me sick with your wise cracks. I tell you, I've got to have some money, and it's up to you how I get it.'

'Do you mean you want to borrow some?'

'I don't care whether I beg, borrow, or steal. The grand old name is in your hands now, so I'll let you choose.'

'Ernest, you act crazy!' His hands, which had been clutching nervously at the edges of his coat, now sought a cigarette, as if they, but not he, knew what they wanted.

'Are you all right?' demanded Victoria, looking at him closely, as he lighted a match with hands that shook. 'You act so queerly. Let's stop fighting; it doesn't get us anywhere. Tell me what the trouble is. If you need money, why don't you come to me, the way you always have? Did I ever refuse you?'

'No. Damn it! But I'd counted on Grandpa's will. God knows, it wasn't my fault. Mother and Dad have preached it to me ever since I was born, and I was just fool enough to believe them.'

'I know. It was an awful way to bring up a kid. I understand, Ernie. Here! For Heaven's sake, don't cry! We're in a public park!'

'I could die on a park bench, and nobody'd care.'

'Nonsense! How much do you owe?'

'I don't know.'

'You must have some idea. Tell me, and I'll see what I can do.'

'I haven't paid you back the last.'

'Well, that doesn't matter. Don't think of it again. How much do you need?'

'I can't tell you. It's awful . . . I can't go back to Cambridge.'

'Ernest Price, put your handkerchief away, and for Heaven's sake, remember where you are. Smoke! Do something! People are watching us. Why didn't you tell me the trouble, instead of talking like a thug? I should think you'd know by this time that's the last way to get along with me. Do you owe fellows at Harvard?'

'Yes — some. It isn't that.'

'Can't you tell me?' persisted Victoria, gently now, for she could see that the boy was suffering.

'I suppose so,' answered Ernest, closing his clenched hands between his knees. 'I've got to — to — I ought to get married.'

'Oh, my soul! When?'

'Now.'

'Do you want to?'

'Oh, can't you understand? Have I got to say any more?'

'I do understand. I mean, do you love the girl?'

'No — yes. I don't know whether I do or not. Her father's going to raise hell.'

'Blackmail?'

'Oh, I guess so. That is, if I don't marry her. You see he thinks — he thought what everybody did about Grandpa. They thought they'd hooked a future millionaire.'

'Oh, Ernie, what a mess! Is the baby born?'

'No.'

Victoria thought for a second. 'Well, we've got to get out of this. What would you do if you had the money?'

Ernest jumped. 'Oh, God, Vic, I'd marry her. I swear I would. If I could get her away from her rotten family, I'd love her, but she's on their side now, against me. If I could only get her away!'

'You can. Take a brace. There's no need to break up, you know. I was just thinking what we'd better do.'

'Vic!'

'Yes?'

'I feel a cur to let you help me after what I've said. I'm sorry. I was desperate. Old Sullivan fairly drove me wild with her smug Irish airs. You see, I had to get an advance or—or they'd be down here telling the family. Then she turned me down, as if I'd come begging, and I was crazy—then I saw you and it seemed as if I couldn't stand it. It seemed as if you were to blame for everything. First you turned me down for Hasty. Well, maybe you didn't think I mattered, being only a cousin, but it took ages to get over it. Then you came between me and Grandpa, and what I used to feel for you turned to hate. You've done me at every turn. If it hadn't been for you, I'd be all right. I'd been borrowing on my prospects, you see, and now, nobody'll let me have a cent.'

Victoria nodded. 'Poor old kid! Haven't you any idea how much you need—in all, I mean?'

'Oh, it's thousands. I've honestly thought of killing myself. I would, too, before I'd let those swine come around the family for money. I swear I would.'

'Sh! Don't! It's all right, so don't say that.'

'Well, I would! And I was going to steal it, and you stopped me again. You may as well know it all, now that I've told you this much. My only hope was to get the job of manager, and — and make it up little by little. Then you crabbed that. Honestly, I could have killed you last night.'

'Oh, Ernest, don't say things you don't mean. They hurt just the same. It's too awful, now.'

'I'm all in, Vic. I don't know what I am saying, and the family drives me insane. They're always harping on my keeping in with you, just as they used to about Grandpa. Taught me to be a little bootlicker — and I swore I wouldn't lick yours. I'd go to prison first.'

Victoria laid her fingers on his cheek. 'Ernest, I don't believe you are well. Tell me the truth because if you lie to me, I won't help you. You've got me back of you, but you've got to play fair. Have you got a temperature?'

'I don't know. Honest, I don't, but I feel awfully rocky, and I don't believe I could stand another year at Cambridge.'

'Study, you mean, or the whole thing?'

'Oh, gee, the whole thing. Study's grief enough, God knows, but I've been hitting it up, I guess you know.'

'Yes, but tell me about your health. You — you haven't a cough, have you?'

'Say, what next? As if I didn't have trouble enough. Sure, I have a cough. Who wouldn't? I smoke thirty a day.'

'Listen, Ernie. I don't want to frighten you, because I don't believe there's any cause to be frightened. You're probably all shot up over this business, but I think we ought to see Doctor Norton. We'll go together, and nobody will know.'

'And — and if there is?' faltered Ernest, his eyes filling with frightened tears. 'Oh, Vic, don't tell me I've got anything else to bear. I can't stand any more. I don't care for myself. It would be a good way out. But it's the family — Dad, you know. If he didn't expect so much of me!'

'Ernest, if you don't brace up, you really won't stand it, and that would kill your family. I believe I've got an idea that will fix you up in every way. Suppose the doctor should say that you have been overdoing, and that if you don't quit, you'll have a collapse. And suppose he suggests that you go into the woods for a while. Well, we've got woods enough in the family. Do you see?'

Ernest shook his head and moaned. 'Oh, it isn't my health that's got to come first, Vic. It's this other thing that's getting me. How can I take a rest cure when I'm worried to death, and what can I do? How can I get well? How can I get married? God, what a mess!'

'I'm coming to that. We've got to think of the family, Ernie, what would be the least shock for

them. Now Uncle Bert evidently has had it in his head for you to get into the business, or he wouldn't have made that suggestion.'

'Oh, he never thought of it till I put him up to it. And I told you why.'

'Well, he's made an opening for us, anyway. The more I think of it, the more I can see my way to help you. How would you like to take up forestry and work into the woods end of the business?'

'Why — why, I don't object to that, but how in the devil —?'

'Wait. I have a plan. The first thing you've got to do is to marry that girl. I'm not asking you about her, but I assume that you really do care for her. Is she — don't you, Ernie?'

'I — guess so.'

'I can see her side so much more than yours, Ernie. It's loads harder for her than for you. And think of her family, too. Try to get their side. Can you blame them for having it in for you? Don't feel so abused, but try to realize that this is a tragedy to them.'

'Oh, don't preach, for God's sake. You don't have to remind me of what a cur I am.'

'All right, then. Now you've started this, and you've got to finish it. You go up to Boston just as soon as you can, and marry that girl, that is, if she will have you. We'll go to the doctor's tomorrow.'

'I'd be a fine one to get married if he says I'm done for.'

'He won't. But there are certain things already

facts that you've got to face. Let's wait and see what the doctor says before we agonize.'

Ernest made an effort to pull himself together. 'Vic, do you realize what you are letting yourself in for?'

'Not wholly, of course, but don't you worry about that. I'm in for good, till we get everything straightened out, and I'm playing with a bigger idea than getting you well and married. I'm wondering if this can be one of those old-fashioned blessings in disguise.'

'My God!'

'Ernest, have you never wondered what will become of the old Price traditions, that went along with the lumber business, if our generation doesn't take a brace?'

'Can't say that I have. You'll understand that I haven't given a damn what became of them lately.'

'It's been a good many years since there has been a Price on the job. Do you realize that? Ernest, I'm going to send you up into the woods, not only to get well and strong, but to find what Grandpa left up there, when he came out for good.'

Ernest swallowed hard. 'I — I can't say it, Vic, but — but you haven't any reason to expect much of me. You know what I mean. I — I haven't always been quite square with you, Vic.'

'You haven't been quite square with yourself.'

'It wasn't my fault.'

'No, but I think you're going to get square with

the world again, with the girl, and with me and with yourself. I'm going to help you, Ernie.'

'God! The relief just about chokes me. Have you — the point is — have you got the money?'

'Oh, I've got lots of it, and, besides, we can always borrow on the good old prospects. I think you're going to be lots happier when you've married her, and made her safe.'

'But do you think there is anything really the matter with me, Vic?'

'I don't know. I do think there will be if you don't alter your way of life. I suppose this thing has worried you to the bone.'

'I've been in hell for the past two months — about her, I mean; and then the will, and all —'

'You should have come right to me.'

'How could I? Besides, I never dreamed anybody could be so damned white. I guess I'm going to slop over, Vic. But I feel as though I had been throwing mud at an angel.'

'Please don't, Ernie — don't be silly.'

'But you don't know what I've been through — not a soul to talk it over with. I've wanted a man, who would understand. I couldn't go to Dad, and — well — I never thought a woman could look at things as you do.'

'I'm just beginning to look at things differently, Ernie. Only this afternoon I was thinking about our little narrow outlook here in Hamlin. It's funny — almost as if I were preparing my mind to meet this. The trouble with you, Ernie, is that you've always been taught to keep your eyes trained close in. They never let you get any

perspective. Poor old kid. Now you're going up where you can look for miles and miles into the forest, or off across the mountains, with no petty limits to your vision. Your mind will seek the far horizon, and your spirit will follow and you'll find peace.'

Then Ernest put his arm across the back of the seat, and laid his head on Victoria's shoulder.

'Sit up! Sit up, dear. They're looking at us. Come on home and we'll have tea.'

'Gee, Vic. I just had a terrible thought for a man who's going to get married.'

'What?'

'Oh, I was just wishing Essie — that's her name, Estelle Kirkpatrick — I was wishing that Essie was you. She's not a bit like you, though. Maybe if you could talk to her a little she'd be more understanding. I guess there aren't any more women like you, though,' Ernest added mournfully.

'You've got a whole lot to make up to Essie, without wishing she was somebody else,' and Victoria started off.

CHAPTER XXVII

VICTORIA went with Ernest to the doctor the next morning, and waited in the anteroom while the shivering youth breathed his 'ninety-nines' to the discriminating ear of Doctor Norton, tuberculosis specialist. When they came out, Victoria knew by their faces that her inspirational diagnosis had been correct.

'I tell Ernest that he probably owes his life to you, Victoria.' Doctor Norton crossed the room and laid a hand on her shoulder. 'If he hadn't come in time to catch the thing in its very beginning, we'd have a different tale to tell you. Just an enclosed lesion. No discharge, no destroyed tissue — whipped-up nerves and a little reaction from the toxin. Rest — that's what he needs.'

Ernest had thrown himself down on the hard leather couch. While Doctor Norton was mixing him a bromide, Victoria sat by him whispering reassuring words and patting him like a child. And the doctor thought to himself that the Prices might have their faults, but they were a devoted lot.

'It's like taking a *détour*, Ernie,' Victoria was saying. 'At first you're furious at having to leave the main road and lose time. But when you get on the back road and see how pretty it is, you can't help thinking how lucky you were to have it forced on you.'

'That's just the idea,' smiled the doctor.

'I guess my case is more like landing bottom up in a ditch, from exceeding the speed limit.' Ernest contributed this to the flow of philosophical thought in a peevish tone, but the unhumorous truth of it made them all laugh.

When Ernest and Victoria were driving home, Ernest said seriously, 'Vic, if things should go wrong, and I shouldn't make the grade, I want to hear you say that you forgive me.'

'Nonsense! You'll make it on high. We've got a job on our hands now with the family. You must help me think of the best way to spring this on them.'

'You're not going to tell them!' Ernest pleaded.

'I think we'd better, Ernie. Things always get out, and what's the sense in going at this sideways. I'll tell them, if that will make it any easier.'

'About Essie, you mean?'

'I'll have to think it over. I want you to skip up to Boston, clean up as many bills as you can, and do the square thing by Essie. And, Ernest, I don't mean, rush in and offer to marry her. This is no movie. I think marriage is going to do a lot for you. At any rate, it is going to do a lot for the baby, and that's what you and Essie have to think of now. I'm backing that baby, Ernest, but I want you to play your part. Tell her about your health. Explain just what Doctor Norton said about a closed lesion not being contagious. She must be made to understand that until you are well, and the baby old enough for her to take care

of, you and she must live apart. Then, she's got to come to you. I'll arrange that.'

'In the woods?' gasped Ernest.

'Not in Hamlin, surely,' said Victoria decidedly. 'We'll wait and see how things turn out. You and she will want to keep house somewhere near your work, won't you?'

Ernest stared.

'What do you say, Ernie? Will you go to work for me? I mean sign up this very day to take orders from me — at a salary? Your first job will be to conduct a happy honeymoon at Eagle's Nest.'

'Oh, gee, Vic! How did you think of it? Oh, Lord, that's great!'

'Isn't it?' Victoria smiled. 'You'll have the dogs and lots of books, and later some hunting. Essie can stay with you as long as possible. Then, as I say, you'll have to be apart till you and she can keep house together. I'll have Miss Sullivan get in touch with McGregor, and he'll take care of you. Will you ever forget his flap-jacks, that time you and I went into the woods with Grandpa? That was a wonderful trip, Ernie.'

He nodded. 'Oh, Vic, you are so good to me, it makes me feel all the rottener. Gee, to begin to see daylight ahead again. I can't realize it! I don't deserve it, and I can never thank you.'

'It is wonderful to be able to do it,' she said. 'Don't forget Grandpa, Ernie. He's making it possible. The idea is this. I'll pay you a small though respectable salary in place of the old allowance, while you are getting well. It will be

enough for you and Essie to live on, and, by the gods of war, Ernest Price, you've got to live on it.'

Ernest smiled in sardonic comprehension. 'I begin to get your drift, old dear. You are planning to make a man of me.'

'One of those happy endings,' said Victoria.

Breaking the news to Bert and Flora was the hardest thing Victoria had ever had to do. After the first shock, they were remarkably cool, and showed deep, sincere appreciation of her part in the affair. Bert seemed to sense the romantic, as Victoria hoped, in the idea of a Price going back into the woods and carrying on.

Essie Kirkpatrick came as the lesser of the two evils they were called upon to accept. The question of his health was so all-absorbing that they seemed not to have strength left to agonize over Ernest's delinquencies. In fact, it was quickly seized upon as a shield for his irregularities, and poor Essie was felt to be the true culprit — a designing woman, taking advantage of Ernest's delicate condition and susceptible nature.

Patiently Victoria went over every particular, from her first suspicion of Ernest's illness (a censored version). Then she brought forth every philosophical argument she could summon to ease their tortured minds. The greatest comfort was that Ernest's going into his grandfather's business would set well on the Hill, and go far toward covering up other factors in the case. Victoria took the hint, and elaborately bolstered up the front side of the family shrine to Appearances.

She felt herself inextricably drawn into the mesh of Bert's family. She had seen their hearts, naked in shameless agony over their child. She had earned and accepted their true gratitude. She was one of them. Aunt Harriet's feud was not her feud. Suddenly the full portent of her position came over her and the magnitude of it made her humble. She was the head of the family. She had stepped into Grandpa's place. She was not doing anything big or generous or personally noble for Ernest. She was just doing what Grandpa would have done, what his father had done before him. The estate was not hers to dissipate according to her own whim. It was the family's. She was just their steward. Grandpa had left her the family as his legacy. She must not scorn money as money again. It was an instrument of mercy, whether it brought succor to a distant heathen or to her own suffering cousin. It could save life and happiness and self-respect. And was that the duty of capital? Was taking care of Grandpa's family the far-reaching service she had dreamed of in college days, when the family and their inbred interests had roused only her amused contempt?

The family — the clan — it was an older loyalty than the nation. It was the group that linked the roving savage with the highest commonwealth. Disband the family and you have an end of civilization. She must get a bigger view of the family. Perhaps the fault had been hers, not theirs.

As Victoria curled softly into her pillow that night, she said an odd little prayer. Had she been

talking to a lesser Intelligence, she would not have been understood to be praying. But Victoria's truest prayers were not implorations. 'I believe I know how it feels to be God,' she breathed to Him. 'The more power you have, the more it doesn't belong to you, but to your dependents. Well, I've acted just the way You would act with Ernest, and it's a comfort to know that I'm right once in a while. . . . Amen,' she added politely.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HASTINGS called to take Victoria to drive, and to confess his intention to accept Marjorie's invitation. In spite of Victoria's plea for a friendly basis in place of their old relationship, Hastings had been very cool, and, what is more, his powder-blue car had found a permanent parking place in front of Marjorie's. Such things are very noticeable to the keen observers of Churchill Street.

Victoria tried to hide her real feelings behind a smoke screen of banter, but it didn't ring true. She could hear the bitterness in her own bright laughter. She was hurt, try as she would to sublimate a sharp pang of jealousy at Hastings's ready acceptance of consolation. She had vivisected her heart, and the operation had disclosed that she did not want to marry Hastings, yet, curiously enough, it had also revealed that she did not want any one else to. 'That's just the woman of it,' she complained to herself. 'It's the way they all act. They're all fools, so of course I am no exception.'

'You see, Vic,' explained Hastings, when they were out on the new State road, 'Mother rather wants me to go. I've told her about us, of course.'

'Of course?'

'Certainly. Why shouldn't I? Why so sarcastic?'

'I don't know. I hadn't dreamed of telling any one till Marjorie demanded to know if you were in the bachelor class.'

‘But you broke our engagement.’

‘I know it.’

‘Then why not Marj? She just asked me to cheer me up, while you sojourn in purgatory.’

‘What?’ Victoria gasped. ‘You needn’t flatter yourself —’

‘Oh, not on my account, dearie. Such egotism would be superfluous, to say the least. I refer to the period or location of retirement for the relatives, while the soul of the departed is *en route*, and the will is being probated.’

‘Hastings, I didn’t mind your being funny about Grandpa when he was alive, but now I should think you could see that is not quite the thing.’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean anything. I’ve always ragged you about your royal connections — I didn’t think.’

‘And I want you to go out with Marjorie,’ she went on, smiling her instant forgiveness for his bad taste. ‘I really do. But I should think that was a question for you to decide rather than your mother,’ she added, feeling another stab of that unpleasant sensation which she supposed was common jealousy — mother-in-law brand. Hastings’s mother always caused it. It was depressing to discover that she was running so true to type.

‘You never understand Mother’s feelings,’ Hastings was saying. ‘She sees Marj as a stepping-stone away from you. Naturally she doesn’t want her only child yearning his heart away over the impossible. It seems funny that I can get a

mother's point of view better than you can. You're not entirely feminine, Vic.'

'Oh, yes, I am,' she contradicted with warmth. 'Unfortunately, yes.'

'I mean you have to be talked to from the shoulder, or you won't stand for it. I always feel as if I must be absolutely truthful with you.'

'I should hope so.'

'Then the truth is, no mother likes to see her son turned down, any more than the average male cares to expose his torn and bleeding heart to the ravens. Marj is a protection for Mother's feelings, and a consolation prize for me.'

'Hastings, I'd almost rather have you lie. You say I am cold. Lord! I don't know which is more heartless, your calculated escape from me, or your very unflattering acceptance of Marj.'

'Please don't say "acceptance of Marj." I can't have her credited with a leap-year party. If you don't care for my bloodless behavior, you can put it down to your own bloodless treatment. Possibly I have a heart somewhere, but I don't intend to act the forsaken lover. It's up to you, Vic. Say the word, and I am at your side, waiting for a thousand years till you can go with me. Otherwise, I go with Marj — or any one. They'll always be substitutes for you.'

Victoria started to speak, but closed her lips and hardened her eyes. Was Hasty taking consolation or revenge? How shallow had been his love if he could talk like this! How petty love was if it was only a part of egotism! Ego offered for appreciation, with another self-seeking ego given

in return. Was that love? She loved Hasty more in her cool denial than he did with his hot protestations. Then why this keen, aching resentment — this — yes — name it — this mean, unworthy jealousy of Marjorie? It was because her friendship was just egotism, too. She wanted Hasty to dedicate his life to a hopeless passion for her. That was it. Then hers was not true friendship, nor had it ever been love. Love must be infinite giving, or — suppose there were no such thing? Suppose she had relinquished dear, charming old Hasty for a phantom, a teasing will-o'-the-wisp, which flitted between the worlds of waking and sleeping? But if there were no such thing as love, how could she have dreamed it? Was her imagination more original than reality?

‘Not mad are you, Vic?’

She shook her head and smiled. ‘No, just thinking.’

‘Bet a penny?’

‘You’d lose money.’

‘Thinking about me? You’ll have to admit that’s a modest remark.’

‘Hasty, I wish we were children again.’

‘Gosh, I don’t. They don’t have half the fun we do.’

‘But they are so care-free and so heartless.’

‘You’re heartless enough, if it comes to that,’ flashed Hastings with a swift glance at her serene face.

‘I wish I hadn’t had to be my own father and mother. I’m tired from having to bring myself up all alone.’

'For Heaven's sake! That's a good one. Wouldn't Aunt Harriet like that?'

'I am afraid I have been an unwise parent, and taught myself a fairy tale that doesn't come true.'

'Elucidate! You talk like the lady of Delphi.'

'It wouldn't do any good.'

'Come on, I'll bite.'

'I don't know why I go on talking. I'm boring you.'

'Madam' — Hastings turned to face her, flinging his arm over the wheel, so the car took a sharp side-step — 'Madam, you have oftentimes angered me, and hurt me, and driven me to drink, but you stand supreme — I mean unique — yes, unique is the word — in the category of women who have never bored me.'

""And Ben Adhem's name led all the rest,"" laughed Victoria, the philosopher forgotten, the woman appeased.

She decided to stop thinking. She was getting positively dull lately. She had missed Hasty and the stimulation of his leaping spirit. It was such fun to be playing with him again. She needed relaxation after her family cares, and, besides, she wanted Hasty not to forget her when he was dancing with Marjorie.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE BIG HOUSE was born to astonish. Four generations ago it had challenged Hamlin and the cup had remained with the challenger. And now, after running the gamut of Hamlin emotions from envy to pity and scorn, it was to enjoy a true renaissance, and command again the breathless though unwilling admiration of the populace.

Churchill Street passed by on the other side, its nose in the air, but behind front-parlor shutters each important improvement was eagerly noted. A landscape gardener had a large crew at work outside, while a decorator from New York smiled and shook his head in sad amusement at the remains of a provincial culture within.

They had been commissioned to 'do the place over,' and they reveled in anticipation of the destruction they would wreak upon that Mid-Victorian relic. They exulted in the fact that the new family knew enough (little enough, of course) not to place that awkward stumbling-block, personal taste, in the way of the artist.

The scalloped iron fountain was summarily removed, and was seen by all Hamlin to ride down a back street in a junk wagon. An Italian marble bird bath was set in its place, and back of the bird bath an antique stone bench, as if some one might have had the Villa d'Este vaguely in mind.

A formal garden in Hamlin! The verdict was 'ridiculous — inappropriate — *nouveau riche*.'

New England gardens should contain conservative flowers, and be born of a love of color and endurance, not a cold feeling for technique. A garden should be instinctive, not calculated through squinted eyes. To dig up a perfect lawn, which had been rolled for generations till you could play billiards on it, and sink it in order to descend to it by marble steps — that was not gardening. And as for a bowling green!!! Some one had inquired of the landscape gardener himself what that alley of green silk carpet could possibly be, so haughtily shielded by poplars and so decidedly undemocratic with its peremptory signs to keep off. English! That's what it was — unmitigated aping of a feudal estate. And they had sacrificed a fine old bed of syringa just to open up a vista, if you could call a wispy line of poplar switches a vista!

If this was modern gardening, then times hadn't improved any since Le Nôtre! Yet, oddly enough, many a Hamlin letter addressed to the outer world contained casual, smug references to the interesting modern developments along the lines of landscape gardening in the home town.

The tragedy of the changes at the Big House depressed Victoria more each day. No one seemed to realize how it hurt. Aunt Harriet and Uncle Matthew looked so guilty and uncomfortable every time the Big House was mentioned that she felt more like giving sympathy than asking it. Hastings had gone out of his way to remind her that Sing Sing was also called the Big House in underworld argot. Of course Miss Sullivan and

the other old employees were resentful, but they were guarded in showing their feelings to Victoria.

She had always scorned Great-Grandfather Price's iron deer, but it had filled her with rage when Marjorie had suggested starting a merry-go-round with the poor uprooted things. If they dared to send those deer down into the slums on a junk cart, Victoria decided to act. She could imagine all the riff-raff of Hamlin gaping out of their back windows while a tumbril full of dethroned aristocrats rumbled to their doom.

She took her place with the watchers behind the blinds. How she loathed people who spied upon their neighbors! The more she thought about those deer, the more they seemed to typify Grandpa and all the bygone Prices for her. It would be sacrilege to desecrate them. They were all that was left of her Big House.

One day when she had heard a heavy 'jigger' stop at the back entrance to the Big House, she rushed to an upstairs window. There was a man talking to other men with his foot on the side of an iron deer. It was lying at his feet, and his was the attitude of the hunter who scorns what he has killed.

Victoria tore downstairs, out the back door, and over to the kitchen entrance, always her natural approach to the Big House. Her heart was thumping and her breath gone when she reached the group of men.

'See here,' she gasped panting for breath, 'what are you going to do with those deer?'

The tall man took his offending foot from the animal and swept off his hat. Victoria felt her cheeks blaze, for this distinguished person in English tweeds was no gardener.

‘I beg your pardon?’ he said.

Then, with all the hauteur she could summon, ‘I am very anxious to have those deer. I want to buy them, I mean. I am Miss Vennard, and they belonged to my grandfather. I can’t have them lying here.’

‘Of course you can’t,’ the tall man answered with the kindest, most understanding smile Victoria had ever seen. ‘Here you’ (to one of the men) ‘— er — have these deer — stand ’em up!’ Then, turning to Victoria, ‘What do you want done with them?’

She didn’t know — she’d send for them, she guessed. Then she turned to go.

‘Oh, please don’t,’ he said sharply. ‘I’m Stephen Gale. I’m so glad you spoke to me about these deer. Something might have happened to them. It was lucky I came down to-day. I was just looking the place over.’

Victoria hesitated, utterly charmed by his straight blue gaze and his beautiful smile. In every gesture and tone he was a gentleman. Oh, for strength to turn proudly on her heel and leave him.

‘Yes, it was fortunate you happened to be here,’ she heard herself saying.

‘And you’ll let me have them sent to you? Do you want them set up — or —’

She shook her head. She knew he wasn’t in the

least amused, though. 'It was just an impulse. You see, I didn't know I cared about them till they were gone.'

'I know. I understand. My mother wanted them left, but they had to come out with the rest of it.'

'Your mother wanted them?' asked Victoria in astonishment.

'Yes. Would you — do you suppose we could walk? We'll go down by the brook. It's just the same down there.'

In a quick exchange of smiles, this stranger — this impostor — this enemy had understood. They picked their way around the little open graves of the deer and walked slowly toward the brook.

'It's very good of you to understand,' said Victoria when they had reached the grove of big pine — 'not to ridicule the deer, I mean.'

'It's wonderful of you to let me give them to you. They mean something that I have hated to take away from you. May I say that I am sorry?'

Victoria had to fight a babyish desire to tell him just what that simple expression of sympathy meant to her. 'It does help,' she admitted.

Stephen Gale stole a sidelong glance at her, then a longer one. The unusually bright color under her olive skin made her more strikingly beautiful than ever. He thought her easy, swinging walk the most graceful motion he had ever dreamed of, and the cool wind stirring her dark hair, and the green jersey she had on blending her into the autumn trees, the most ravishing

picture he had ever beheld. It was all he could do to look away, and Victoria missed the warm intensity of his eyes. They walked in a comfortable silence before he said haltingly,

‘Of course, you feel us awful intruders.’

‘Oh, you know,’ said Victoria, amazed to feel that he really did, with no words from her.

‘We got it for my mother — at least my father did,’ he went on. ‘Would you care to sit down? Would it be too cold?’ They stopped at the long log which had been Victoria’s pet seat always.

And then, because she did want to, and hated herself for allowing the enemy to sit on her log, she murmured under her breath, ‘Yes, we’ll sit down if you want to.’

‘I was going to tell you about my mother. We can’t be formal — you and I — with this house in both our lives. Can we?’

‘No, I suppose not.’ And Victoria felt herself deliciously though unwillingly committed to a friendship with this man.

‘You see, I want you to understand, too, and then perhaps you won’t hate me.’

‘I don’t hate you. Go on.’ Victoria didn’t want him to talk about his mother, though. What in the world was the matter with her? She wanted him to talk about her!

Stephen turned a little so his eyes might never leave Victoria’s face, and she looked down, while he talked.

‘Imagine a little country school teacher in a village way up at the jumping-off place, who had never seen anything nor been anywhere. Places

were just colors on the map and people mostly names in books. Imagine that young girl coming down to Hamlin for her first teachers' convention, and walking up and down Churchill Street, feasting her eyes on the green lawns and beautiful houses, and the splendid old elms on the mall — then see her standing before the gateway of the Big House, peeking inside like a child looking into fairyland. She had never dreamed of such a place. The best house in her town was a tall, unpainted farm, with a tail of outbuildings and a bright yellow silo. You know there is romance about the Big House, and it stirred a hungry longing in my poor little mother. . . . Well, she married my father and he promised to take her to the city, to Houlton or some such place where she could have a nice home. But, instead, he moved her farther north, where she had to work like a dog, washing, scrubbing, and cooking, hauling water before I was big enough to get it, and even cutting through the ice for it. Then Father began to make money, but money didn't mean anything to him. He put it all back into timberlands. Mother begged for some of the decencies of life. What she wanted more than anything else on earth was running water in the sink!

'Terrible,' said Victoria with a swift glance at Stephen's earnest face.

'He was the same with me,' Stephen went on. 'I begged to be sent away to school, but he wouldn't hear of it. Then, when I was prepared for college by boning all alone after I had gone beyond Mother, we both tried to make him see it.

But he told me I could go into the woods or get out. I got out.'

'That was awfully hard. Go on.' Victoria's voice was full of sympathy.

'Am I boring you? I don't know why, but I wanted you to know.'

'I understand. Go on.'

'Then Mother —'

'No — tell me about you.'

'Oh, I worked my way through Yale, and then got a job on a cattle boat for Liverpool. In the meantime, my father had been away for weeks up in St. John and Quebec as usual. One day he came in, took off his pack and his boots, demanded coffee, and settled down by the kitchen stove. He calmly announced that Mother could have any damn thing she wanted. He had been biding his time, you see, always intending to keep his promise to her. It was just like Father to keep her waiting thirty years.

'Of course she was too stunned to take it in. They talked about it all night long, and she confessed her dream of the house on Churchill Street. How anybody could tell a dream to my father, I don't know, but, anyway, she did and he said he'd buy it for her.'

'Oh, beautiful!' gasped Victoria. 'I'm glad he did. It's the most thrilling story! Poor little thing . . . I'm glad she got her dream.'

'You think she did?' asked Stephen soberly. 'My father knew the house. You see he had led a different life from hers. He was always going to Hamlin on business — knew all the old lumber-

men. And as he got into bigger and bigger operations, he went around more or less in St. John. It wasn't that he didn't know there was such a thing as civilization. He simply wanted to take it at one jump. He said he had had his way and now she could have hers. When she told him that to live in this house would be heaven to her, he laughed and told her to look up about the camel and the needle's eye. But she didn't have her way after all. She wanted it just as it was, especially the iron deer — just as she had seen them through the gates. But my father had no idea of stepping into anybody's ready-made home, so he commanded the changes.'

Victoria waited a moment thinking over his story. 'You think you'll like it — Hamlin, I mean?'

Stephen looked straight into her eyes and said, 'I think I'm going to be very happy here.'

CHAPTER XXX

EARLY next morning Maggie and Esther, on looking out of the kitchen windows of the Other House, were surprised to see a half-dozen iron deer neatly herded alongside the garage. At the front door a messenger delivered a long box addressed to Miss Vennard.

The family was at breakfast. There was nothing to do but open that undisguisable box of flowers under their inquisitive eyes. And of course there was a note in it. Victoria knew there would be. She felt her eyes suffused with the blood which seemed to rush from the very depths of her heart.

‘Roses,’ Aunt Harriet pronounced, as Victoria drew out handfuls of guilty red flowers.

‘Too bad,’ said Uncle Matthew. ‘Somebody’s missed the funeral.’

Victoria hoped to hide the little white envelope, but Aunt Harriet spotted it. ‘There’s the card,’ she said helpfully.

Victoria read it quickly to herself, her eyes still blurred. ‘Well, that’s very decent of him, I must say.’ She commanded a casual tone. ‘It’s just from — from the Gales’ son, saying that he had Grandpa’s deer sent over.’

‘Grandpa’s WHAT?’ Matthew popped.

‘The deer — the iron deer. I told him I wanted them.’

‘When, for pity’s sake?’ demanded Harriet, screwing up her eyes at Victoria, then swiftly

searching Matthew's face for signs of inside knowledge.

'Yesterday.' And Victoria quickly described for them her impromptu descent upon the group of gardeners, among whom happened to be this young Gale, and her haughty demand of him for protection of the iron deer. She omitted reference to the little walk that had followed.

'Well,' Aunt Harriet gasped, 'it would take more than a box of roses to reconcile me to those deer! You don't — you wouldn't think of having them around?'

'Now hold on, Harriet; you forget we used to ride on 'em. Vic's got sentiment for 'em and so have I . . .'

'Couldn't we put them in the garage?' suggested Victoria, weakly grateful to Uncle Matthew. 'Mr. Gale said to have some of his men move them where I — where we wanted them.'

'Oh, he did!' Harriet stiffened. 'I imagine we can manage to look after them ourselves. Don't you consider it rather pushing to send flowers at this time in the morning? Shall you acknowledge them?'

'He's gone,' said Victoria, hoping her voice did not echo the mournful note in her heart. Nor did she find it necessary to read aloud Stephen Gale's reason for coming back as soon as possible.

Victoria decided then and there to go to Portsmouth. She couldn't be under family observation when the heir of the Big House returned to Hamlin for good.

She longed for the quiet comfort of Aunt Amelia's wisdom, and she thought the tall brick house would understand how the head of a family feels whose castle has fallen. And then she thought perhaps she could talk to Aunt Amelia about Stephen Gale.

The heralded approach of the new family had gone far toward mitigating the effect on the Hill of Ernest's affair. Bert and Flora had retired behind their natural cloak of mourning, and by the time they reappeared the unpleasant little ripple of gossip had died down.

Harriet had listened to the tale of Ernest's *détour* with mixed feelings. In the matter of his health she merely recognized the inevitable truth of her prophecies. The episode of Essie fed an ignoble satisfaction.

Ernest wrote that he was happy and getting well, and at last Bert and Flora were persuaded to combine their usual fall hunting trip with a visit to Eagle's Nest. At first Flora had refused to visit Ernest under the circumstances, but Victoria's argument prevailed. She had suggested that, since she was bound to accept both Ernest's wife and his child, the Hill would find less to talk about if it were done at once, with a brave display of parental blessing.

Then Bert pointed out that, whatever Essie's station or ancestry, it would be she and not they who would be closest to their son. His health and happiness lay in her hands, not theirs, inexorable though such fate might be. And the

first of another generation of Prices was already in her keeping. The vessel must be accepted for the sake of its precious contents. Thus was a threatened break in the family façade averted.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE long Northern winter had already set in when Victoria returned from Portsmouth. It would last officially until the ice went out of the river. The significance of that momentous event was lost when Hamlin ceased to live by logs alone, but the date was still the subject of many a bet along the water-front.

Long before the first big snow had come to stay, Hamlin prepared for hibernation with meticulous ceremony. Double windows and storm porches reënforced stout old frames against the prying draughts of thirty below. Foundations were banked with thickly mounded, fresh-cut boughs, or out in the poorer districts with sawdust and earth. Soon such distinctions would be buried under a deep white blanket, as layer after layer tucked the little houses up to the eyes, and the big ones well over their granite bases.

And the stillness would be broken into the crystal song of sleigh-bells, the grinding squeak of heavy pungs, the sharp scrunch of hurrying heels, and the oddly muffled echo of the seminary bells. Some one said that the long winters had taught Hamlin two arts: how to live expertly in the open and gracefully indoors.

Mrs. John Lawrence's tea formed a sharp contrast to the cold, blue world without. Her first crop of paper-white narcissus had been moved from their dark corners and gave forth an exotic

fragrance. The crackle of wood fires, the soft glow of many candles, and the sociable smell of coffee soothed the senses with a luxurious harmony.

It marked the end of mourning and the opening of winter activities on the Hill. Mrs. John Lawrence was the accepted leader of Hamlin's rigid little four hundred. Harriet Price had never challenged her right, for it had made no difference in her standing. In fact it enfolded her in a double armor of invincible social security. As the wife of Matthew Price and the daughter of Tom Lawrence, she could rest comfortably in the position of Queen Dowager.

When Dorothy Lawrence had arrived in Hamlin the contemptuous Boston beauty, bride of 'Jack' Lawrence, she made it understood that the bluff and hearty nicknames enjoyed by Hamlin aristocracy as sentimental hang-overs from the frontier days, would not be pleasing to her.

Once, years ago, her mother-in-law had attempted to assert her claim to a full title. She had stood at the door of Burke's stable, and called into the ammonia-drenched darkness within, 'Please saddle Mr. Thomas Lawrence's horse.'

Then there had come a loud Irish voice, 'Hey, Mike, Tom Lawrence's new wife wants his mare!' When the owner of the voice approached within polite expectorating distance, he had added, 'Hell, marm! Me and Tom was in school together!'

It was the fenceless spirit of the old days reaching out to greet her, and it warmed her heart. She had never insisted again. But one

did not abbreviate Mrs. John Lawrence's identity.

What would have been daring in any one else was accepted as the prerogative of Dorothy Lawrence. The object of this tea was twofold. First, she wished to demonstrate that the Lawrences and the Prices were on excellent terms, in spite of the rumored break between Hastings and Victoria. If there were such a rupture, it must appear to be mutually agreeable. Harriet poured, and Victoria floated among the guests performing the semi-official duties of a daughter of the house.

The second object, less subtle, but more effective, was to re-define the boundaries of Hamlin society. Churchill Street, with eligible tributaries, and certain favored sections of the 'other side,' had been invited. But the Big House was excluded. Coming from a lesser source, it might have been termed a slight, but coming from Dorothy Lawrence it meant disqualification.

The hostess moved about with slow, conscious grace, putting in a word here, correcting an impression there, supplying a touch of comfort, anticipating an unsuspected want, cleverly reorganizing little groups which wanted to separate but dreaded disintegration. Though she traversed her domain like a stately Juno, great dark eyes drooped to veil their watchfulness; she was but a mortal queen after all. No sooner had she diverted the current of conversation into safer channels than her willful subjects reverted to their whispered discussion.

If Mrs. John Lawrence had entertained that

afternoon in honor of her new neighbor, Mrs. Elisha Gale, that lady could not have been more thoroughly introduced to Hamlin society.

No monarch can detect the first rift in his empire. Perhaps he was not born when it occurred. Human perceptions are not adjusted to catch the movement in the opening of a flower, nor in the march of the hands around a clock. Results are the milestones we count.

‘Victoria!’

‘Yes, Aunt Dorothy?’

‘Will you be good enough to see if Mrs. Jordan got the plain hot water she wanted? And then, dear, please go over and talk to Miss Greenough. She looks rather wistful. I’ll relieve you later.’

And turning with the uncondescending condescension of the great, she bathed little faded Miss Emma Parsons in the radiance of the Hastings smile. ‘How delightful of you to come, Miss Parsons.’

Dorothy Lawrence’s voice was one of the social assets which she had been taught to develop when she was training to come out. She still played upon her deep contralto tones, but not as an asset now; merely to amuse and charm herself with the contrast to the high, piercing notes which made such ear-splitting concourse. ‘I so rarely go over on the other side now that I am particularly glad when you come to us,’ she added, pulling out a deep, sincere stop.

Old Miss Parsons was pleased to be there and said so. ‘I suppose you’ll have gay times on the

Hill this winter, with so many young folks home and the Big House open, and all — not that it was closed before,' she hastened to insert, as she thought she saw a shadow of annoyance flit across her hostess's face — 'but you understand what I mean. It's been so many years since it's really been going the way it used to — with James sick so long, and Sarah so queer — don't you think she *was* queer, Mrs. Lawrence? I'd often to think to myself as I'd be going up to Sally Crown-inshield's — oh, now, wasn't that a dreadful thing! Poor Sally! I'd think to myself, "I wonder if that old ballroom will ever be open again." James's wife was never much of a hand to entertain, but Mrs. Jim would give the loveliest parties! Oh, Mrs. Lawrence, wouldn't it be nice if the new family would give a lawn party like old times!'

'Very nice, indeed. I wonder if you will have your cup filled. No more? . . . Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Peabody!'

She reached Mrs. Peabody's group in time to hear her say, 'They've put in three new bathrooms, and how they've done it without sacrificing closet space is more than I can see — Oh, Mrs. Lawrence, your paper-whites are lovely this year. I can't do a thing with them — whether it's the gas or what, I don't know.' After Dorothy had delivered a hasty lecture on bulb culture, she turned away to bring up the promised relief to Victoria.

Miss Greenough seized upon her. 'Mrs. Lawrence, perhaps you can straighten us out. Is this

Elisha Gale any relation to the Gales that used to run the fish market on the bridge? Do you suppose he could be? That was ages ago — then it was Sims', and then — then who?'

'I really don't know, Miss Greenough. I feel quite an old resident until you real natives begin to reminisce. I have great difficulty in remembering even the present generation of fish markets.' Aunt Dorothy's laugh was entirely false, but Miss Greenough was amused. Then to Victoria she said, 'Mrs. Hale has lost her scarf. Would you mind going up? So good of you.'

Victoria was grateful for a chance to escape. It was clever and decent of Aunt Dorothy, but something was displeasing her. How brittle her laugh had been!

Mrs. Hale was skirmishing about in piles of fur coats, and working more mischief among the overshoes than The Virginian. She greeted Victoria effusively. 'You blessed angel! See if you can find that pink scarf I got in St. John. You know the one. I asked Marjorie to help me, but you know how much good she is at finding things. She had to go and feed Hastings down in the study.'

Victoria cleared a chair. 'Bessie, please put on Mrs. Hale's overshoes.'

'There, thanks, Bessie. I can flap the top one.' Then in a whisper, as Bessie withdrew, 'Wasn't Mrs. Gale invited?'

'I think not.'

'Goodness sakes! And such a big tea. Marjorie's had the son up to the house. They all have. Well, I never! Why, even the Torrences

are here! I didn't know your aunt knew *them*.'

'Oh, I guess she knows everybody,' said Victoria lightly, an unpleasant picture of Stephen Gale having tea with Marjorie coming to her mind.

'Everybody she wants to, you mean,' Mrs. Hale panted from her frantic exertions. 'Well, I cannot get over it. I never supposed I'd live to see the Big House left out. Has your Aunt Harriet called? I've rather waited —'

'I believe not.'

'Oh . . . The Episcopal minister's been there. So has his wife, although no one seems to know what they are. Wouldn't it be a blow to the Unitarians to have the Big House turn Episcopalian!' Mrs. Hale mused upon that thought while Victoria hunted. 'Trust them to hold a garden party or something on the grounds first thing. Some one said your minister had called, too. Do you know he has?'

'No, I really don't know a thing, Aunt Ellie. I just got home yesterday. Here's your scarf right in the sleeve of your coat. It just matched the lining, you see.'

'How stupid! I was referring to myself, dear. Now if I can only get Marjorie started. I don't suppose she has any idea of time, though.' Aunt Ellie's fat cheeks turned red. 'I don't want to go alone, I'm so afraid of slipping.'

'I'll walk up with you.'

'Nonsense, my dear!'

'Please, Aunt Ellie. I want to get out!'

CHAPTER XXXII

'AUNT HARRIET, I wish you would call on Mrs. Gale.'

Victoria and her aunt had been having a rare little *tête-à-tête* before the fire. Now this from Victoria threatened the friendly atmosphere and brought a sharp gasp from Harriet. It was that queer, socialistic streak cropping up again. She thought Victoria had been away from college long enough to get over it. 'Well, why not?'

Victoria was going to be obstinate. She was certainly getting more and more like Grandpa.

'If you cannot see why not, how can I explain? If your Aunt Dorothy had dreamed that Mrs. Gale was any one whom we should like to know, she would have asked her to the tea yesterday. I should think that settled it. It did for every one there.'

'Oh, no, it didn't, Aunt Harriet. You only think it did because they wanted you to think so. People are such meeching cowards.'

'What an expression!'

'Well, they are — crawling, cringing worms!'

'Just whom are you referring to? Do you consider your Aunt Dorothy a cringing worm? That is very insulting, Victoria.'

'Oh, no! I was just applying sociology to the masses.'

'Hardly the masses there, my dear, in the sense you mean it.'

'Oh, yes, the masses. Aunt Dorothy is the only leader in the crowd. You could be. You are a potential leader.'

Harriet was flattered. Her 'Well?' was less antagonistic.

'I was just thinking — if you're interested —?'

'Yes, my dear, go on.'

'I was going to say that the cake-eaters are ready for another leader.'

'The "cake-eaters"?''

'Strictly speaking, they are males, but I think the species is very slightly differentiated into two sexes. They resented the Big House being left out, because they don't want to be left out of the Big House . . . oh, yes, they did, Aunt Harriet. Perhaps you didn't notice out in the dining-room.'

'And you propose for me to call at the Big House and lead the left wing?' Aunt Harriet laughed. She would not have laughed once, nor could she and Victoria possibly have engaged in such conversation.

'That's a great idea. I hadn't thought of it exactly that way, but you are a Cavalier, too. What they are waiting for is an Oliver Cromwell.'

'There, I thought there'd be socialism to it.'

'I adore the cosmic usefulness of that word to you. It covers everything off the Hill, now doesn't it?' she teased.

Harriet smiled a slow, withered, reluctant smile. Living with Matthew so long had been deadening to her wits, and now she was discovering extraordinary enjoyment in crossing

swords with Victoria. But there were buttons on their foils.

'The point is, that the Big House cannot be snubbed.'

'But its occupants can,' stated Harriet firmly.

'No. That's the queer part of it. The Big House has more personality than any one family can have. It is Hamlin. Hamlin cannot snub Hamlin.'

'How ridiculous! The Price conception of the Big House is not the town's.'

'We have poured the essence of Hamlin into that house, and it lives in us, and we in it,' said Victoria gravely.

'To come down to facts, the Gales have lived in that house for over a month, and who is aware of it?'

'Every one. Aunt Harriet, I'd bet on the Big House whoever lived in it. Aunt Dorothy isn't strong enough to snub it.'

'Your Aunt Dorothy had no idea of setting herself against the Big House. She merely invited her chosen friends to tea. She was not even thinking of the Gales.'

'Well, will you call on them?' Grandpa's horrid habit of getting back to the point.

'Certainly not.'

'Then I shall.'

'What do you mean? Why, Victoria! I really don't know what your Aunt Dorothy would think. She is hurt — very much hurt at the way you have treated Hastings, just as I have been for a long time, but we don't show these things. Now

if you should do this — oh, I beg of you not to. It's so — so belligerent.'

'I think Aunt Flora would like to call.'

'That doesn't matter. She is — well, you know she really doesn't matter.'

'I do, though.'

'Of course you matter tremendously, Victoria. What a queer thing for you to say! You don't care for society. You have always scorned it, and yet . . . surely you don't see an Oliver Cromwell in yourself? Or is it just to antagonize your Aunt Dorothy?'

'I shall not be thinking of Aunt Dorothy, any more than she was thinking of the Gales when she asked her chosen friends in to tea.' Victoria did not care to add that she would be thinking of a poor little school teacher standing outside the gates of the Big House, and of the beautiful dream that couldn't come true now without a fairy god-mother.

'But, Victoria!' Harriet's voice rose in fright. 'Surely you don't intend to ask her to my — to this house!'

'You would call it socialism, Aunt Harriet, but it isn't. It's rank snobbery on my part. I am one of the masses who can't bear to be left out of the Big House, you see.'

Harriet stared at her for one unbelieving second, and then she understood. 'You are serious then. I thought for a moment that you must be joking. Of course you know what every one will say. If you had been around here for the past month, and seen how Betty Blake and Eleanor

Phelps *and* — their mothers have been running after Stephen Gale, I hardly think you would care to join the chase. And, furthermore, I think you owe it to Hastings to keep that young man in his place. He thinks money can do anything.'

'I'm going to test out the power of money, myself. I find I like it, after all, Aunt Harriet.'

'I don't understand you.'

'The idea struck me yesterday at the tea. You and I together, or I alone, will call on Mrs. Gale. Then you and I — or I alone — will give a party for her that will make the Hill sit up. And — this is the point which will be brought out by my experiment — all the Hill will crawl to the gates of the Big House with idiotic excuses for not having called before.'

'Victoria, I need not remind you that you can do as you please in this house. Your uncle and I realize that it is ours only by courtesy. If you prefer taking up the Gales to standing with your family, then I have nothing more to say.'

'Oh, be a sport, Aunt Harriet,' answered Victoria, refusing to adopt her aunt's attitude. 'I didn't get the Gales here. You did. I should think you'd be man enough to stand with me and take the consequences.'

'Yes, Victoria, I suppose you and I have fought more like men than women.'

'God rest their souls,' said Victoria to herself, thinking of Hannah.

'So — well, I'll try to be a sport, as you suggest. I admit defeat. Let us not refer to it again.'

'Then you will call at the Big House this afternoon — now?'

'I think I have no other engagement,' said Aunt Harriet.

CHAPTER XXXIII

It seemed very strange to have the door of the Big House opened by any one but Lena. She had a little house of her own now, due to Grandpa's generosity and her own frugal savings, and in her place stood a six-foot butler, stiff as a wooden image. He was the only butler in Hamlin.

They were ushered into the drawing-room, at the farther end of which Grandpa had lain on a mound of flowers. It was that which Victoria saw now, sharper in outline than the new furnishings, more poignant than the personality of Mrs. Gale who entered in a few minutes.

She murmured 'How-do-you-do' with a quick smile as they rose to greet her. Victoria started forward with hand outstretched, and Mrs. Gale shyly took it, then seated herself gingerly on a Louis Fourteenth chair.

'We are your neighbors,' explained Harriet stiffly, thinking how ludicrous it was to be introducing herself to the Big House.

'Yes — I knew from your cards. I — I am glad to see you,' she added doubtfully. Then a silence, during which Victoria noted that the crystal chandelier had been retained. Very flattering. Everything else was changed. There were no pictures at all; just mural decorations in turquoise and gold, a few old tapestries, some museum pieces of furniture, and the windows veiled in golden gauze, as sheer as sunlight.

What a painful setting for this plain little woman, in her plum-colored afternoon gown, her drab hair brushed severely back above a thin, tired face. Her deep-set blue eyes faintly suggested her son's. Then Victoria tried to picture Stephen in this salon of the Sun King. Ah, he would fit into any picture and form the central figure. But she couldn't make it seem possible that this negative person was his mother. Perhaps she wasn't negative, though. Perhaps it was shyness, or possibly she had been hurt by the family attitude, and this was deliberate coolness. The ice must be broken or Aunt Harriet would reap an inward victory. What on earth to say, though? There must be no reference to the Big House, no apology for not calling sooner, no mention of Aunt Dorothy's tea, and careful avoidance of the subject of Stephen.

'Isn't it very cold for this time of year?' inquired Mrs. Gale suddenly, as if she too knew that there was ice to break.

Victoria could have laughed with relief. She knew that Aunt Harriet, having made the initial effort would exert herself no more, so she answered hurriedly, 'We have awful winters.'

'But don't you — didn't you where you came from? It must have been even colder,' suggested Harriet with characteristic Hamlin loyalty to the climate.

'Yes, terrible,' said Mrs. Gale, 'but then, it was different. We'd always lived there, at least for years, and I had plenty to do, so the winters didn't seem so long.'

'Oh, you'll find enough going on here,' said Victoria with a rush of sympathy for the lonely woman perched on that ridiculous chair. She belonged in a wicker rocker, sewing in a sunny window, with some scarlet geraniums on the sill, and a little gray kitten playing with her spools.

'Stephen, my son, he's having a real good time — dinners and dances and what not. We never see him, hardly.'

'Oh, indeed!' Aunt Harriet had observed the coming and going of Stephen quite as assiduously as the other neighbors, but she said, 'I believe I did hear that you had a son.'

'You see we haven't been going out at all,' explained Victoria quickly.

'Of course not. I understand. And I think it must be real hard for you to come over here. I didn't expect — I didn't see how you could.' Mrs. Gale sent Victoria a short smile, then looked down at her hands as if surprised to find them lying idle in her lap. 'My son likes it here very much.' She added this without emphasis, shyly, fearfully, lest it seem like boasting.

'We have a charming group of young people on the Hill,' Harriet went on. 'It is so nice to have them back from college. This will be a very social winter, I suspect.'

'My husband is away most of the time,' answered Mrs. Gale, unconsciously revealing her associated ideas.

'Does he still go into the woods?'

'Oh, yes. He's up in Nova Scotia now — that is, he left at three this morning.'

‘And your son?’ pressed Harriet. ‘Does he go into the woods with his father?’

‘No. That is, he just goes up for fun. He likes to hunt in the fall, and he has a place where he intends to do some salmon fishing in the spring. Young folks are different now.’

Victoria felt a sharp pang of disappointment. She wanted to ask what he did do, but knew it would be bad taste, according to Aunt Harriet’s social ethics. Then the conversation tottered and fell back upon the weather, and Harriet gave Victoria a sign that it was time to go. They were in the hall when Stephen came in.

His impulsive entrance, magnificent height, and brilliant good looks seemed to fill the hall with life and warmth. Harriet looked him up and down with swift appraisal while he bowed with charming poise. No Price could have greeted guests of the Big House with more of the grand air.

‘This is my son — Mrs. Price,’ murmured Mrs. Gale, flustered with pride and confusion. Stephen bowed again. Then as he bent over Victoria’s hand he seemed to be weighing something very precious, and when she drew it away, he let his own drop with an eloquent gesture of emptiness.

‘You’re staying for tea, aren’t you?’ It was not an invitation; it was a command. ‘Mother, they are staying for tea.’

‘We’d love to,’ said Victoria, while Harriet grimly allowed herself to be divested of her seal-skin coat. They seemed to be sweeping along on the buoyant tide of his wishes. He took charge of them, ordered tea, arranged the seating, and in

answer to an inner prayer, a babyish, teeth-clenched wish of Victoria, he sat down quite close to her. When at last Victoria consented to notice her aunt's frantic signals, only the knowledge that Stephen was going to call that very night made leaving bearable.

She drifted over to the Other House in a rosy cloud. Although it did not contain Aunt Harriet, it mitigated her presence, and filtered her voice so that only the meaning and not the quality reached Victoria's tingling nerves.

She mistily gathered that her aunt had found the Big House transformed into a tawdry showcase, its mistress pathetically dull, the son very polite, astonishingly good-looking for a member of the middle class; that evidently manners could be bought and applied externally nowadays, and that it had not been necessary to go back to tea when they had already stayed a proper time for a first call.

Victoria's senses swam with exquisite indifference. She answered dreamily that Aunt Harriet was a good sport, a darned good sport.

CHAPTER XXXIV

VICTORIA dreaded to see Stephen almost as much as she longed to. The sweet drug which numbed her senses would not last, and she feared that even his presence might dispel the charm. As she waited for him, she felt like the lass in the rustic story waiting to receive her first suitor — ‘starched muslin trimmed with ribbons — shy blushes matching the rose in her hair.’ But unlike the maid in the story, she did not wonder what this strange stirring in her breast might be, nor why her heart beat high and her breath came in thick, startled gasps each time she thought she heard him coming. She knew very well what it was. The question was, Did she want it to be that?

While she was still in possession of her faculties, she wanted to analyze her sensations, and to weigh her singing pulses against her hesitating, calculating mind. If this was the thing she had always believed in with the tenacity of a child who fears to out-grow Santa Claus, wouldn’t she rush into it whole-heartedly and whole-mindedly? She knew her heart was impaired, but her mind was clear.

Hastings had upset her ideas on love. She had even begun to doubt its existence as an entity till this happened. This feeling that warmed her soul with ineffable delight must be what her mother had felt for Victor Vennard when she left her

family to cleave only unto him. This was what Grandpa must have meant when he told her to think well before she gave her mother's baby away. Could it be possible that Grandpa had ever been in love? Of course not! Aunt Harriet and Uncle Matthew? It was indelicate to accuse them. But why wasn't it perfect? Why was something holding her back?

Stephen's mother's words came darting into her mind like sharp pains. Why wasn't he up in the woods with his father instead of drinking tea with callers? He preferred hunting and fishing to lumbering, the glorious industry of his State. What would Grandpa think of him? She owed it to Grandpa to carry on his line with vigor, not with play. Stephen was worse than Hastings: one the child of the old rich and the other the spoiled child of the new. Was hers an antiquated code that went out of date with Grandpa? Or were there men left in the world who held the old ideals?

And because this man, whom she did not approve of nor respect, was coming to see her, she had burning cheeks and a thumping heart! She who had always kept Hastings pacing the hall for two cigarettes had been waiting a full half-hour for this stranger. And she had changed her dress twice into the bargain, choosing at last the dark green velvet trimmed with brown fur, because some one had said that green made her eyes look like pools of icy water. She wanted Stephen Gale to see just how icy her eyes could be. Then a dawning anger at his lateness began to mix itself

with an uneasy fear lest he forget to come at all.

She heard a light step on the porch — Esther ambling to the door, and then, through a thick drumming in her ears, the shrill voice of Marjorie Hale announcing herself to the family.

‘Lo-oh, Vic-cy! Oh, there you are!’ hurling herself at Victoria. She drew back sharply at the blankness of her welcome. ‘Why haven’t you called up? I knew you were all right because Mother saw you coming out of the Gales’.’ She waited for Victoria’s nodded admission. ‘And Aunt Harriet too! Change of heart?’

‘Oh, we just got around to it.’

‘Was Stephen there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, can you beat it?’ remarked Marjorie, eyeing Victoria sharply. ‘Did you like him?’

‘Yes.’

‘I should think you were playing twenty questions,’ she laughed. ‘Steve is sure amusing. Wait till you know him.’

Victoria flushed angrily. She didn’t know exactly why, but she wanted to combat that word ‘amusing.’ ‘Is he?’ she managed, without too much edge to her tone.

‘Oh, you haven’t been here, my dear. He’s a scream! You should see him tramping up past our house mornings — English muffler flying — English setters leaping!’

‘What’s wrong with that picture?’ asked Victoria in a hard low voice.

‘Why, every one knows where he came from — and all — so this Prince of Wales stuff strikes us

a bit upstage. If he only did something, but, as far as we can find out, he does nothing, but acts very important over it. Hasty simply cannot get him at all!’

‘He wouldn’t.’

It was Marjorie’s turn to blush. ‘Well, my dear, I’m glad he’s got a champion. He certainly needs one. I’m a little surprised, though — considering your —’

Victoria had not time to demand, ‘Considering what?’ for the bell had rung. ‘There he is now, I guess,’ she said with heroically mustered coolness.

‘For Heaven’s sake! Why didn’t you tell me? Snappy work in returning calls, I’ll say! What’ll I do?’

Victoria muttered something under her breath as Stephen appeared in the doorway.

‘Well, look who’s here in bright array!’ grinned Marjorie. ‘Cue for my exit — what? — Oh, Vic!’ turning back, ‘nearly forgot what I came for. I specially wanted to know if you can’t break loose and come out to camp to-morrow with the crowd.’

‘It’s specially what I came over for, too,’ said Stephen, taking her hand in his very deliberately and very gently. Hers wanted to cling tight as it had that afternoon, but she snatched it away, for Marjorie was regarding them with bright interest, before darting out.

‘Nightie-night,’ she called. ‘See you to-morrow.’

‘Will you come with me?’ Stephen repeated, after they both took deep sighs of thanksgiving at Marjorie’s departure. ‘It will be my first party

out there, and it would be so wonderful if you went with me. It will be a dream coming true. So was this afternoon when I found you at the house, talking with my mother.'

(How headlong he was. She must check him.)

'I should be glad to show you the old camp. It's one of our landmarks.'

'Good! I want to thank you for going to see my mother. It meant a lot to her. You see, after she bought her dream, she woke up — poor little soul. The gates of the Big House were still locked. Then one day a beautiful fairy princess came along and opened them.'

'Don't! You make me feel silly.'

'Oh, I haven't come to the silly part.'

'I think you'd better not,' said Victoria quickly. 'The princess was just interested in dreams in general. She thought it would be such a good joke on stupid old life to make a dream come true.'

The boyish eagerness went out of Stephen's face, and his whole mood changed.

'Dreams are a part of life, even though they can't be bought and set up like washing-machines.'

Victoria nodded thoughtfully. 'Perhaps a dream is a picture of hope. Do you think hope lies?'

'There are possible and impossible dreams,' said Stephen, with the air of settling the Freudian controversy for good. 'I think a dream is no more than a pattern of something we must create or bring about ourselves. It is a blue-print of future

reality. I have my own creed, too. I think prayers are like that,' he added simply.

That naïve statement coming from a man of heroic build touched something vaguely maternal in Victoria, something which had never been touched before. It is why he is so poised, she thought. Pure truth, like pure modesty, is unself-conscious. She wished she dared to talk to him about such a thing. Imagine talking to Hastings this way!

'No one can answer my prayers but myself,' continued Stephen, confident, not boastful. 'I have a plan of life — a dream-print, which no one can make come true but me. It can't be bought, and it can't come true immediately. It may not happen till I'm dead.'

'I didn't know a dream could be so impersonal.' Victoria was ashamed of her disappointment in the subject of his dream.

'It isn't impersonal. It's frightfully egotistical. Perhaps when my mother stood outside the gates of the Price estate, she conceived my dream as well as hers. My children — my grandchildren, at least — will stand outside no gates, gazing wistfully within.'

'Your grandchildren!' Victoria gasped. 'What a terrible dream! I can't bear to think of my grandchildren. I should hate them. I don't want to be old.'

'Neither do I, but I am planning way ahead. I've got that much of my father in me, though he would deny it.'

'Your father doesn't approve of your dream, then?'

'He doesn't know about it. Nobody does but you.'

'I don't, though.'

'I'll tell you. In the first place, I don't underestimate my father's money, and I'm glad there is so much. Fortunately, for this dream of mine, I shall have that to start with.'

'Most dreams nowadays are based on father's money,' Victoria could not help remarking. She was going to be disillusioned. There was no doubt now.

'Sounds parasitical, doesn't it,' smiled Stephen blandly. 'However, to do what I want to do, one must have money.'

He was going to do something, then. But he sounded suspiciously snobbish.

'What are you going to do? I'm interested.' She felt the warmth drain out of her voice. Stephen was an arrant egotist. He was not thinking about her.

'To put it crudely, I am going to cultivate a paternal ancestor for the unborn generations.'

'Eugenics?'

'Yes, by George, exactly that! The only way you can help posterity is by being a good ancestor. Father has gathered in the fruits of labor. I am going to sow the seeds of intensive leisure!'

'Then you're not going to do anything?' Victoria's mind seemed to swing on that point, and Marjorie's slur came back to her.

'Oh, lots of things.' Stephen was too absorbed in developing his idea to catch the note of dismay in her voice.

'But you are just going to enjoy the money your father earned and your mother nearly killed herself to save?'

'I hoped you would understand.' His tone was injured.

'I don't, quite, but go on. I'm very literal, you see.'

'Oh, no, you aren't. You merely have the American point of view. We make a fetish of work in this country, work and the fruits thereof. Those are our gods.'

'Fruits, not the work. I'll tell you my views after I've heard yours.'

'Do I bore you? I don't know why I want to tell you all this. Yes, I do. It is because I want you to approve of me.'

'Go on, I'll try to understand.' And over and over in her mind a tiny voice was wailing, 'He doesn't love you. He doesn't care anything about you. He just wants a sympathetic listener for his egotistical scheme.'

'I think what this country needs now is a leisure class.' Stephen spoke slowly, picking his words.

'Good gracious! I don't agree with you!'

'Wait. I don't mean a lazy, indolent, non-productive class. Unemployment is just as unhealthy at the top as at the bottom. I mean *otium cum dignitate*. It would be the leaven of America.'

'It is what England is trying to rid herself of,' said Victoria.

'It is what has made England the leading na-

tion of the world. It is why England has had time and space to breed poets.

“What shelter to grow ripe is ours?
What leisure to grow wise!”

You know that thing?’

‘No.’

‘I am afraid you don’t quite see what I mean. Until we have a class above money-grubbing, and after they get their money, pleasure-grubbing, we’ll have no aristocracy.’

‘And you think one is necessary?’

‘As necessary to society as a roof is to a house.’

‘I’d have said that a new foundation is more necessary than a roof, and the foundation is laid by labor, not leisure.’ This was a new Stephen, new ideas, which must be combated. He had ideals then, but they were not hers. He was saying:

‘Our industrial class is safer than our upper crust in spite of the agitators. The trouble with us as a nation is that we shy at the word “superior.” We think that the American Revolution and the Civil War were acts of God making all Americans equal. We ought to realize that civilization — aristocracy — is a process of evolution.’

‘Then how are you going to force it? It seems to me that aristocracy is an unconscious thing, the result of breeding. I have an aunt in Portsmouth who is, to my mind, an ideal aristocrat, but she’d be the first to say that this country is all middle class, upper and lower according to opportunity.’

'We haven't learned to grasp the opportunity of leisure yet. I'd love to know your aunt. I can imagine that she would be an aristocrat.'

'Business of dragging in the personal,' laughed Victoria. Stephen was so serious. He seemed to mean everything he said so deeply. She couldn't imagine him in her crowd. No wonder Marjorie thought him amusing. She must protect Stephen from Marjorie.

He went on: 'There is a distinct racial as well as social function which only graceful, dignified leisure can perform. It must supply our national culture.'

'You sound like Nietzsche and his Superman.'

'It's an old idea and we'd better be getting back to it. I am merely applying to my personal life the theories which more gifted men would write about — are writing about, for that matter. What good does it do to write idealistic bibles for the future race if the parents of the future race go on living as before?'

'And this is the man,' thought Victoria, 'whom I considered lacking in ideals. I pity him and his ideals in Hamlin.'

'I'll be very frank with you,' she said suddenly. 'There will be a few, of course, who will agree with you and sympathize, but the majority of the people here will only laugh at you. I know Hamlin.'

'But, Victoria' (it seemed perfectly right for him to call her Victoria from the first), 'why should I conform to their sense of humor, when what to them is ridiculous happens to be serious to

me? What is it that I ought to do to measure up?’

‘In a way I can put my finger on it,’ said Victoria thoughtfully; ‘but in another way it is awfully subtle, because you’ll answer at once that we don’t practice what we preach. Hamlin wants innovations from within — do you see? Your proposed way of life seems like an underhanded criticism of theirs. Perhaps we are not civilized enough up here to recognize leisure as a vocation. If you’ll excuse me, we understand it only as a vacation.’

Stephen laughed.

‘If people get the idea that you intend to use your leisure just to improve yourself, they’ll think it snobbish. If you use it entirely for others, they’ll think you are queer. I am being awfully frank with you, because I can’t bear you to get started wrong in Hamlin.’

‘But I am going to use it to improve myself. That’s the idea. I must be improved before I’ll be any good to others. I’m going to study and travel, and later maybe I’ll have a try at writing. I’ve got enough to say — but I’m dumb at saying it. There’s work enough to do to keep a dozen men busy right here in this town — work that can’t be accomplished if some one doesn’t give the time. Of course my father can’t see it. He’s amused at me, too, but we go our own ways now. He says: “What has this town done for you? You can buy your way into politics, society, business — anything. Why mess around on committees?” His attitude is typical. Oh, I shall have a lonely time of it, I suppose. Being thought queer is al-

ways lonely, but my people were pioneers, and I'm not afraid of blazing a trail.'

'I've always been rather lonely,' said Victoria.

'You'd have to be — you're so different. Ever since that day you dashed into my life, I've — I've had a special feeling about you. I've wanted to make good in your eyes. I don't care if the whole world laughs at me, if I could have your approval.'

'I do approve of the principle, but I think you could work it out more — more happily for yourself. You could go in with your father, for instance. That's the dream fathers have for their sons.'

'Is there no way to make good except to go on making money?'

'You could retire later, and do these other things. My great-grandfather went into politics, but not till the end of his life.'

'That's the trouble with this country,' retorted Stephen hotly. 'Men give their odd moments or their decrepit ones to their country, or leave it in the hands of politicians. What's the matter with retiring when you are young, and can give a strong man's whole energies? You confuse leisure with loafing, too.'

'If the men of my immediate family hadn't taken their leisure with quite so much "*dignitate*," we'd be living in the Big House instead of you.'

'Tell me this,' said Stephen, 'if you did approve of me, would you come and live in the Big House?'

'If I ever approve of you, I shall tell you so,' said Victoria.

CHAPTER XXXV

SOLIDLY mounted on a blunt knoll overlooking the lake stood the old camp, its main room and two spreading wings suggesting a chunky, gray bird, huddled in the snow against a steep background of tall, black trees. Close around it little clumps of long-limbed birches sought to hide their nakedness in the evergreens' thick winter coats. Behind it rose tier upon tier of climbing trees, which formed at the top a part of that saw-toothed line which edges the sky of northern Maine. Beyond each woody slope a little pond, and every hill crowned with a diadem of pointed firs.

Old haunts of rabbit and deer . . . forgotten prints of stealthy, moccasined feet . . . and now, from down the lake, a line of swift black objects, making incongruous tracks across the snow. Rapt whiteness slashed by darting colors; silence broken by the hoarse roar of engines, the rasp of gears, and shouting laughter, as madly swaying toboggans spill their loads.

Built by a generation which was just learning to play after hours, the camp had descended to an age in which pleasure was the big game of life. In the days when pleasure was the thin frosting on the cake, James Price, Tom Lawrence, Johnny Bartlett, Will Hale (later Judge), and two or three others, formed a loosely federated club, the object of which was to race ice-boats on Crystal

Lake. On rare Saturday afternoons, when the wind was high and the weather favorable, they would leave their offices on the water-front and tramp the four country miles to the lake. At sunset they would furl their sails and tramp back again. After the camp was built, the lush period of baked-bean suppers set in.

Years later, their children, Matthew, Bert, Harriet, and their crowd, used to drive out in long barges, feet warmly bedded in straw, clasping hands snugly covered with buffalo robes. The ice-boats were rotting in their sheds, but a brand-new toboggan slide could shoot its screaming coasters halfway down the lake. And the patient teams which had drawn them out to camp would wait at the foot of the lake to drag them back to the slide again.

Matthew and Harriet often talked of those days of real sport. They had great contempt for the modern way. The old toboggan slide was down, and there was something almost sacrilegious about automobiles racing up and down the lake with those lazy youngsters towing behind on toboggans. What was the world coming to?

The bright, sappy logs of the camp had long since turned a smooth, satiny gray, and the walls were blackened with the smoke of a thousand wood fires, but caught within them was the spirit of old Hamlin at play — a legacy from the past. Slung across the hand-hewn rafters were long, slender skiis, with ancient toe-straps, and the soles of discarded rubber boots tacked on against slipping; canoe paddles, burnt with initials as old

as the epitaphs on Woodlawn stones, the same letters whose gold was fading on the water-front. And there was James Price's famous green sled Dexter, cast aside by little Ernest when he got his Flexible Flyer. But little Ernest had never heard of two-forty, nor felt the thrill of Dexter's two-seventeen-and-a-quarter.

Above a huge stone fireplace the head of the bull moose Tom Lawrence shot still sneered at proceedings beneath him, his wicked little eyes unsoftened by the passage of years, his arrogant nostrils still resenting the rise of greasy smoke.

'Venison, Vic?'

'I should hope so. This is only seconds — oh, not so much, Ralph.'

Stephen Gale, who had clung doggedly to the seat beside Victoria, leaned over and whispered in her ear:

'Deer-meat for our first meal! Is it an omen?'

Victoria turned her back on him. Marj and Hastings were directly opposite, and Victoria could feel a most baleful watchfulness in Hastings's eyes. Next to him was Betty Blake, whose name had been coupled so freely with Stephen's. She had been very cool to Victoria when they were setting the table. And Marjorie hadn't helped at all, but had dragged Hastings away to hunt for red berries.

He had been matching with Rus Bartlett who should have the privilege of cutting the water-hole. That nice feat of outdoor craft was always sought after by the male picnickers. The winner

was allowed a special detail of admiring girls who feigned attention to the brush fires near by. And it absolved him also from less manly tasks, having to do with potatoes and onions.

Ralph Wadsworth, dispensing steaks at the head of the table, acted as host. It was always he who managed to get out a little early and get the fires started, and that terrible chill off the place. He cooked the meat, because no one else could seem to stand the heat and smoke.

It was he now who noticed that Stephen Gale was stranded between Victoria's back and the Orman girl, who was too shy to talk to him. Stephen was looking about him at the old prints and trophies on the walls.

'Great atmosphere,' said Ralph, nodding at Stephen. 'Our grandfathers built it, you know.'

'Yes, I was thinking about them,' Stephen answered with a slow smile.

The others who had been half-listening looked up quickly at this, as if to scent possible criticism, unbecoming in an alien.

But he only said, 'That's a nice model of the Walter Ross. The whole place looks as if we had stepped into a picture of fifty years ago. It sets you to thinking.'

'There've been some great old parties staged out here, and some fine old guys eating venison around this very table,' said Rus Bartlett, leaning back in his chair, soul and body replete, and mood attuned to echoes of the glorious past.

Ralph got up to throw a log on the fire, and to kick another nearer to sizzle off its snow.

'Bet there have been some hot old arguments, too,' he grunted, lifting a log as big as a child into position. 'They say more than one election has been fixed right under the eye of Mona Lisa.'

Stephen glanced up at the moose so affectionately indicated.

'And many a "hoss trot," too, if my old granddad was among those present,' added Hastings in his best up-State accent. 'When I hear 'em gas-sing about the world going to pot, I just wonder what they'd think of their own doings — that is, if we did it.'

'That is, if we get your Irish,' laughed Ralph. 'I guess you'll have to hand it to the old chaps, though. Where'd we be without them?'

'Oh, blah!' One of the Hawley twins had spoken with his mouth very full. He swallowed, and added clearly, 'We're no different from them.'

'Except that we don't try to run the city government from camp,' Hastings yawned, leaning unnecessarily close to Marjorie to toss his cigarette end into the fire.

'I think the world would be further from going to pot if we did.'

Victoria drew a startled breath. Oh, she didn't want Stephen to talk out here! How unnecessary to drag that in! The others were but mildly interested, however, and she hoped it would pass unnoticed. But Hastings, always quick to resent the slightest question of his dicta, retorted:

'What would you suggest, enlarging our membership or extending our energies?' His tone was not pleasant, and the interest in the argument

promised to pick up. Every one had wondered how Hastings would act when Victoria appeared with Stephen. Now there was a look in his eye which fed a delightful excitement for the bystanders.

'Extend our energies, by all means,' answered Stephen, offering his cigarette case to Hastings across the table.

Hastings took one to hide the malice in his next remark.

'I should say that would take more leisure than energy — more than most of us have, anyway.'

'We have time for anything but our own welfare. If the average business man gave as much time to his city as he does to his golf, things would be different.' Stephen's face was alight with eagerness, Hastings's flushed with antagonism.

'Guess that lets us out, Hasty,' put in Jack Peters nervously, for he distrusted the twitching of Hastings's thin nostrils.

Hastings allowed his nose a full sneer, and said to Stephen:

'Do you mean that you yourself would mix into the dirty game? I have heard it whispered along the Rialto, but I thought it was just the Hamlin News Bureau at work.'

'I think it is the duty of every man of property to give a certain amount of time to his city,' replied Stephen stiffly.

'Then you'd have a property representation? That isn't democracy.'

Marjorie nodded violently, as this remark seemed to take with the crowd.

'That's what capital says when it tries to justify inertia. "The government of the people and by the people!" We may live to see the day when it will be just a government *for* the people, because we've stayed out too long — a federal guardianship for a nation unfit to govern itself. Does that sound like democracy to you?'

'No, it sounds like a stump speech.'

There was a little gasp of disapproval. Hastings had gone a bit too far.

'But would the people elect your man of property?' asked Rus Bartlett earnestly, trying to cover Hastings's rudeness.

'George Washington was a man of property. Nobody sneered at him for going into politics.'

'But wasn't the war responsible?' asked one of the girls.

'People always associate patriotism with war,' said Stephen harshly. His face had lost its buoyant look, and his head was thrown back defiantly.

There was an awkward silence, which Marjorie broke pointedly. 'Do you mean that you would take an office yourself?' She liked to boil things down to quotable form.

Stephen turned a dull red, as he felt the prickling atmosphere about him — hostility, curiosity, and surprise.

'Wouldn't it be a little presuming for a newcomer to announce himself for office thus informally?' He met Marjorie's inquisitive gaze squarely.

Victoria had sat silent, tense, miserable, achingly sorry for Stephen, furious with Hastings,

but feeling from the first that Stephen had chosen a very poor time to express his views. She had warned him. But she had let him confront her crowd without a word of support from her. He had needed her and she had failed. She'd had neither the courage nor the courtesy to take his side. Chairs were scraping — they wouldn't hear her if she should speak now. If she didn't she would never forgive herself. Stephen had risen. His hands were on the back of her chair.

She cleared her throat. 'Hasty! . . . Listen! I guess it's a pity that men like Stephen Gale don't go out for office . . . and if he does, I'll vote for him.'

CHAPTER XXXVI

CARDS were out for Mrs. Matthew Price's At-Home to meet Mrs. Elisha Gale. Victoria's name did not appear on the invitation, for Harriet had pointed out that it would be quite unconventional for a young person to be sponsor for an older one. If it had to be done, it should be done correctly. Victoria gave in with a great show of yielding, for her point was won. Matthew, fearful that Victoria had been done out of an honor, remonstrated with unusual insistence.

'Matthew,' Harriet had said when they were alone, 'please leave the question of etiquette to me. When I feel things you know they are very apt to be true, and under the circumstances, I feel that it would be a little nicer for my name to appear alone. I shall say nothing more. Later you will begin to understand my reasons.'

'Humn,' replied Matthew. 'Trust you to weave a mystery about a tea-party. I should think Victoria's getting so thick with young Gale would make it seem all right.'

Dorothy Lawrence made no comment to Harriet, but accepted her invitation to pour. Of course the Hill sizzled with comment, but if Dorothy Lawrence's probable actions were discussed, it was done beyond her hearing.

While Dorothy was deliberating in the bosom of her family, her husband said tentatively, 'I

have to see Gale more or less in a business way, and I'm always running into him at the Touraine. I think perhaps it would be just as well to be on friendly terms, dear.'

'Wouldn't it look a bit small-town to hold off, dearest?' asked Hastings. 'It might appear that we were peeved or jealous, and that would be a little too thick. The best way to ignore the thing is to accept. Isn't that the way it strikes you, Dad?'

John nodded, and the point was settled.

'It is only on Aunt Harriet's account,' said Dorothy to her son, after John had gone out. 'Of course she is doing this on account of Victoria.'

'You think it is as bad as that, then?' Hastings tried to look unperturbed, but his mother read the fear darkening his eyes.

'Don't you, dear? And isn't it best after all?'

'If I thought so, by Gad, I'd ask Marj tomorrow. Damned if I'll let that Main Street high-hat think he's cutting in on me.'

'But Hastings, dear, I thought you decided that you did like Marjorie. She is much the better type for you, and her attitude toward me is far more suitable.'

'Yes, she's loads easier to get along with, but — Oh, I can't explain it, Mother. Damn it! What a mess life is! If it weren't so asinine, I'd say that I blame the whole thing on the Big House. I can trace the change in Victoria from the day I mentioned that it might have to be sold. I think Aunt Harriet had been hinting it.'

'Nonsense, darling. It is just Victoria's erratic

nature. Her mother was like that. I want you to be happy, dear.'

'Happy! What is happiness?'

'It isn't false stimulation of the senses, nor mental exhilaration, nor spiritual exaltation, in spite of what the poets say. It is comfort — contentment — peace in the long run. One couldn't be peaceful with Victoria.'

'And war is hell — eh, Mother?'

'Marriage with a person too independent to be married may be that. If more people obeyed their sense instead of their senses, there would be fewer divorces. Think of poor Ernest! He might have had Eleanor for the asking.'

'But, Mother, people — men at least — don't want what they can have for the asking. I'm not hitting Marj. She's the biggest peach in the world, but I am speaking in general terms. Just suppose Victoria should — should marry him — and they should live over there, could I be a decent husband to Marjorie with her so near? And I'm not getting my sentimental fear complex from your friends the poets, but from my own friends, the modern free lances. I could have my peace and contentment all right, as long as Stephen Gale kept off the Street. I know I could have got Victoria back. The sight of him inspires me with murder.'

'Then the sooner you marry Marjorie the better.'

'I'm not sure that you are right, but you and Father seem to hit it off. Is this the way you have always felt — or only —'

‘Only since I was old?’ his mother finished, smiling a little sadly. ‘The time to be old is when you are young, Hastings. Yes, fortunately I have always held that view. And when you are forty-seven, I hope you will be as young as I — owing to a peaceful marriage.’

CHAPTER XXXVII

VICTORIA walked slowly down Churchill Street, troubled and unhappy. The afternoon had been spoiled for her, because certain laughing echoes from the discussion at camp had drifted to her ears. The discovery that she did care what people said, after her lifelong pose of not caring, was disconcerting, and she was a little angry at Stephen for forcing this discovery.

Stephen's crime seemed to lie in being 'different.' It was an indefinable offense, but one summarily punished by Hamlin. Of course there were many who admired him for his wealth and charm and appearance, but Victoria wanted people to think him faultless; yet she hadn't the courage to think him perfect herself. The men liked him, except that they couldn't make out his game. The herd put their heads together and presented a mass of huddled flanks as a protest against what they couldn't understand.

Stephen had subscribed generously to various charity drives. In that he was just like other rich men, but he had been willing also, to work on committees just like the women. He seemed to regard it as his duty. That was the queer thing about him. And of course it was all right for a wealthy young fellow, with nothing to do, to bother himself with Boy Scouts, and public ski-slides, and inter-class skating races, and so forth, but what was the idea?

Then this pose about what he believed would be good for Maine — some one hinted that Augusta was his goal. For instance, his buying up deserted farms was the biggest piece of foolery anybody ever heard of. Apparently he bought them because they were deserted. That was the reason he gave, and it didn't sound quite balanced. He was having them restored, and would put men in to raise sheep; not that he intended to go in for sheep-raising himself, but he believed in sheep for Maine. One way of appealing to the farm vote!

Victoria suspected that whatever of these rumors reached her were more or less expurgated, for the Hill was quick to realize that Stephen Gale was an accepted visitor to the Other House. The family, bless their hearts, had not breathed a word of original criticism, in her hearing, at any rate, nor had they repeated any of the current remarks. If there were indications that Stephen was to be admitted into the sacred family preserves, then he would come purified and justified before the world. Even Essie had been gone over with the family whitewash brush. Victoria no longer scorned the solid support of the Family Front. It was good to know that she stood firmly entrenched behind it.

Her heart gave a warning leap. A tall black form disengaged itself from the square gatepost of the Big House and came hurrying toward her.

'Oh, I was afraid you'd gone by!' Stephen's face was bright with happy relief.

'I wondered if you'd be there,' Victoria ad-

mitted, choosing her words carefully, lest he guess how wildly she had hoped so. This dual activity of mind and heart was not only hard to bear one's self, but difficult to explain.

'I was composing something,' he said, touching her arm to urge her up High Street instead of crossing to the Other House. 'It sounds sort of flat now, but while I was waiting, looking this way and that for a sight of you, I thought of this: "Time is an invisible wire, upon which moments spent with you are hung, like bright lanterns linking darkness with darkness." I was going to write it to you,' he finished with a short, embarrassed laugh.

Victoria was silent. Her throat was full. While his mind had been full of poetry, hers had brooded upon unworthy criticism. What did it matter what people said? . . . And yet things rankled.

'Oh, Stephen, I don't see how you can think such lovely things about me, when I do nothing but complain and criticize.'

'What now? Tea-party gossip?'

'I'm a fool to let it bother me, but I can't seem to rise above it. I guess you'll never live down those remarks you made out at camp.'

'You made a remark out there that I'd like to live up to.'

'What?'

'You said you would vote for me.'

'But I had to stand up for you or be a quitter, when they were making you ridiculous.'

'I didn't feel ridiculous.'

'Then you didn't need me to make that scene, after all?' Victoria's voice was full of hurt pride — unsalved ego.

'I need you now.'

Oh, for the courage to say, 'Take me, Stephen. You know I am yours!' But no, she would not give in until she could be at peace inside. There were still too many doubts — too much her mind could not swallow.

They turned down a long street and walked beneath the wide-spreading branches of spruce trees, whose thickly feathered wings made a white arch over their heads. There was no sound but the sharp crunch of their own feet; nothing stirring in that still blue hour after sunset. Stephen shortened his step to suit Victoria's.

'Can't you take a deep breath and chase that bridge club out? We can't be anything but real out here.'

Victoria shuddered. It was an echo of her own thoughts, that day ages ago, when she had found out about poor Ernest. Where was her real self? Was she untrue to that as well as to Stephen?

'I try to be honest, Stephen,' she said. 'I really want to be a help to you.'

'I need you so,' he said again. 'Do you remember when I first met you — it seems years ago, as if we had always known each other — I said that my plan of life was independent of other people's creeds? And you said, so was yours? Well, I am afraid mine isn't altogether independent now. I can't seem to go on without your sanction.'

'It makes me very proud, and humble too.'

I'm not worth it. My opinion isn't any good, I guess. I used to be so sure; now I'm wavering. I used to think that my opinion was the only one that counted. Other people seemed weak-minded to me.'

'And I am not as strong as I thought I was,' said Stephen. 'For instance, there's a thing I've got to ask you about to-night before I give my final answer. . . . They've asked me to take a class of boys at Sunday School.'

He must have felt Victoria's inner gasp of dismay, for he added hastily: 'You think it's ridiculous?'

Victoria could hear the terrible witticisms of Marjorie and Hastings at the expense of 'her Sunday School teacher.' (Oh, why must he take life so seriously?)

'The boys themselves suggested it,' Stephen offered in an apologetic tone. (The cheek of their expecting such a thing.)

'Oh, I don't know, Stephen,' she answered feebly. 'You must do as you think best. Wouldn't it tie you down a lot?'

He laughed. 'I could still get home in time to cook the Sunday dinner. Why is it funny, Victoria? Please tell me.'

'Why, it isn't funny, but —'

'But you think that people would think it was.'

After a minute, Victoria said honestly, 'Any boy who went to Sunday School to you would be lucky.'

'And if you had a boy of fifteen, who had outgrown his old maid Sunday School teacher, and

threatened to quit, would you be glad if a man came along who could hold him to it — and teach him the relationship between religion and life?’

‘Yes, Stephen, of course I should — but —’

‘And if the man were not only willing, but felt that it was the only decent thing to do? Especially if he were a man of leisure, who didn’t have to play golf on Sunday morning?’

‘Oh, I suppose you’re right.’ Victoria admitted this with a helpless sigh. She was ashamed of her dread of seeing Marjorie after this latest activity became known.

‘You are doing something to my will,’ Stephen said desperately. ‘I have always set a certain goal and reached it, in spite of everything. My father’s objections to my way of life have been nothing more than — than that!’ He kicked a piece of ice into the street. ‘He has given in, not I. I have always done what I thought was right, and now — you make it hard.’

‘Don’t, Stephen!’

‘If you’re ashamed of the — Sunday School business,’ he continued in a tight voice, ‘I’ll say no.’

Victoria shook her head. ‘No — not for the world! I want you to do it — you know best.’

‘Don’t you ever think about children, Victoria?’

‘No. That is, I am interested in the race, and that sort of thing, if that’s what you mean.’

‘You ought to, even more than I,’ said Stephen quietly.

‘On account of my family, I suppose you mean.’

'Yes, if you don't mind my saying so. You have told me so much about them.'

'My grandfather was ashamed of his sons because they chose a heritage of leisure. My grandfather and I are alike. That is where you and I differ. Your ideal for the next generation is a new culture; mine is a new virility, and I can't see virility in your plan. It's the old "shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves" idea. I guess I want shirt-sleeves for my grandchildren!' Victoria stopped abruptly.

'There are mental shirt-sleeves, you know,' Stephen said, and they walked for some distance in silence. 'I tell you what, Victoria, you and I belong to a new age. You think I'm different — unique. I'm not. Of course I don't amount to much personally, but I belong to an important whole. There is a new spirit broadcasting, and I'm just picking up the message. "What did you do in the War?" belongs to the past. I believe my kids will want to know what I did after the War, and this is the sort of thing they will mean.'

For answer Victoria felt the echo of a remark overheard the other day stabbing through her mind. Some one had accused Elisha Gale of being a War profiteer, and some one else, to go one better, had hinted that Stephen had been a slacker.

A question had trembled on her lips several times, but she had not dared to put it to test. When she came to examine it, she knew that it formed the bulwark of that mental barrier between Stephen and her. She had always said that she would marry no one who had kept himself out

of the War — and Stephen Gale must have been old enough to be in, although she had never heard him mention it. What he said out at camp had only increased her fears. Here was an opportunity to put the difficult question.

‘Were you old enough to go into the War?’ she asked bluntly. A bit of Marjorie’s tactics, she thought.

‘No — but —’

‘Where were you — at college?’ She felt the blood drain away from her heart. This would settle things.

‘Oh, I was in it, all right!’ Victoria was so giddy from relief that his voice sounded queer and far off. ‘I was going to tell you how funny I was, trying to keep my voice from shooting up to high C, when the examining officer questioned me. I was just a big gawk of a country boy, not quite seventeen, but they took me for twenty-one because I knew horses. I was six-feet-two, and sprouted a beard. You should have seen me!’ Stephen laughed at the memory. He couldn’t see that Victoria’s eyes were bright with tears.

‘Why have you never told me?’

‘I don’t know. It belongs to the past, you see.’

‘You are younger than I thought. I supposed you were lots older than Hastings.’

‘That was nineteen-fourteen.’

‘Oh!’

‘We lived right on the border, so I just stepped across and went over with the Canadians.’

‘And then you went back to college?’

‘No, then I began. I was four years behind.’

I must have told you why — or did you think I was just plain dumb?’

‘Oh, I didn’t know. I am awfully proud of you, Stephen.’

‘I’m glad if it gives me rating with you.’

They had circled back to the Big House, and stood between the giant posts, leaning against the open gate. The Big House looked like an ice palace, its frosty whiteness gleaming against a background of pine and fir. Warm oblongs of yellow light made the banked snow look blue. They watched the front door open a second while some one took in the evening paper, then turned back to each other.

Victoria linked her arms in the wrought-iron grill-work of the gate, just as she used to do years ago.

‘Who has the little room back of this corner one?’ she asked.

‘No one.’

‘It used to be my mother’s,’ Victoria said after a moment.

‘Really? I’m glad. It’s next to mine.’

‘Stephen —’

He stopped kicking the ice from the granite post.

‘Do you remember suggesting a new Victorian period for the Big House?’

‘Yes — oh, Victoria, are you telling me that you approve of me?’

Her head nodded almost imperceptibly against his breast.

‘Which means that you’ll come — soon?’

She smiled her answer with starry eyes. Then to his amazement he felt her shoulders shaking with laughter.

'Victoria — darling! What is it?'

'Oh, I just had a wonderful thought. We'll let Aunt Harriet announce it at the tea.'

THE END

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY



3 9999 10029 927 8



O GENTEEL LADY!

Esther Forbes

In the days of stays and bustles of hoop-skirts and crinoline, Lanice Bardeen left her native village, just as girls do to-day, to seek the life and career that she so ardently desired. In Boston, she found agreeable occupation with a publisher, and met, among other celebrities, Captain Anthony Jones, an English adventurer. The lady, in spite of her boasted gentility, loved this young rake with an all but fatal passion. He returned to England, and she, shortly after, went abroad, met Tennyson, George Eliot, the Brownings, and other famous men and women, and plunged, herself, into literature. But of greater moment than these outward adventures was her emotional struggle as she sought to find in love, in literary creation, and in maternity an outlet for the insurgent flood of life that beat insistently within her.

Here is a first novel marred by none of the weakness and hesitations of the young writer; a vigorous, richly colored, and stirring story, a profoundly moving study of the changeless heart of woman.

Picture jacket in color by Kleber Hall.

\$2.00

NEW FICTION

LARION

By RAFAEL SABATINI

DANCING FLOOR

By JOHN BUCHAN

THE KEY MAN

By VALENTINE WILLIAMS

THE MISSING ISLAND

By OSWALD KENDALL

THE SUN WOMAN

By JAMES WILLARD SCHULTZ

THE LENORE

By TERENCE O'DONNELL

POWDERED ASHES

By THEODATE GEOFFREY

THE PENFOLD ADVENTURE

By RALPH D. PAINE

FOLLY'S GOLD

By LEROY SCOTT

TOBEY'S FIRST CASE

By CLARA LOUISE BURNHAM

THE MAGIC FLUTE

By SARA CONE BRYANT

THE FORTUNES OF HUGO

By DENIS MACKAIL

THE SARDONIC SMILE

By LUDWIG DIEHL

MY ÁNTONIA

By WILLA CATHER

THE GIANT

By JOHN OWEN

THE BIG HOUSE

By MILDRED WASSON

BLENCARROW

By ISABEL MACKAY

HALF A SOVEREIGN

By IAN HAY

CARTERET'S CURE

By RICHARD KEVERNE

PALIMPSEST

By H. D.

LAVENGRO

By GEORGE BORROW

THE TESTAMENT OF DOMINIC BURLEIGH

By GODFREY ELTON

THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

By JOHN LOMAS

THE SACRED TREE

Part II of 'The Tale of Genji.'

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY